

PZ3

No. B812 Kin



Boston Public Library

Do not write in this book or mark it with pen or pencil. Penalties for so doing are imposed by the Revised Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

This book was issued to the borrower on the date last stamped below.

STACK FOUR		

65-2552

KING'S END

By ALICE BROWN



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
The Riverside Press, Cambridge

[1901]

COLLEGE LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

To E. E. R.

WITH THE LOVE OF TWENTY YEARS



KING'S END

I

It was four o'clock of an afternoon in May ; yet the air moved softly, as if it were June, and the sky stretched clearly blue, with great drifting clouds, like a later summer. A straggling village under a hillside lay asleep. This was King's End, so called in Revolutionary spirit, a hundred years ago, when it was ashamed of being St. George ; and it lay open to air and light, as if nobody had been at home since the founding thereof. The road, marked by scattered houses on either side, curled alluringly for an interval until the land began to rise ; then it ran, a fine, yellow track, straight up the mountain. Here, with the ascending slope, it became deeply wooded like the mountain itself, darkened with fir, and softened by patches of new spring green. Thimble Mountain was not very high, counting from the sea level, but it had an altitude recorded in the

imagination of the dwellers below. They spoke of it with great pride, because it was the only considerable height in an undulating country. It wore the moral grandeur of inaccessible peaks, and in reality some of the features inseparable from high and lonely fastnesses: purple shadows when the sun was sinking, frowning stretches quite barren in all seasons, and one or two rocks, grotesque in imitative outline. To-day it held a tranquil guardianship; the village slept, and the mountain watched it. The world below there was always very still; yet this, by some coincidence of travel, was an hour of deepest quiet. Some of the women had gone up the mountain to an outdoor meeting, held by Elder Kent, the traveling preacher, who came this way at least once a year, and most of the men were scattered fieldward, following the plough.

Old Mrs. Horner lay in her bed, last autumn set up in the clock-room, and gazed with fiery eyes at a fly buzzing on the pane. He was a herald of the coming tribe, and her gaze, foreseeing the summer battle which would be of no avail, cursed him as he buzzed. But there was no one to kill him or wave him forth. Her husband was afield. Big Joan, the help, had gone into the marsh for cowslips, and she her-

self was still unused to her bedridden state. The tall clock ticked as maddeningly as the fly buzzed. Everything in the room had its chosen way of exasperating her, always except the inmate of the clumsy wooden cradle close beside the bed. This was a fair-cheeked baby, sound asleep.

Sally Horner smoothed the counterpane with trembling fingers, and then retied her cap strings. The Bible lay beside her on the bed; she gave it a little resentful shove, and drew it nearer frowningly. She looked up with challenging inquiry into the Constitution mirror, tipped so as to reflect her bed, and the picture she saw there still further put her out: a thin face, with sanguine skin dried to a durable snuff-color, a sharp nose, sandy hair put smoothly back under her cap, and hot, red-brown eyes. This was one of her nervous days, and there was no one near to note it. Not a sound, save the buzz of that fly, in the village, the township, the whole world!

"I could swear!" remarked Sally Horner aloud.

As if summoned by that daring potentiality, a footstep came swiftly along the path to the front door. It was a man's tread, unhalting, rash. Sally's face lighted with keen inquiry.

She pushed back one side of her nightcap and turned her head to listen. Fear was unknown in that still place, but curiosity held every hearthstone. The heavy latch clattered; then the door swung open. A man stepped inside the little entry and faced her, framed by the casing. Sally Horner uttered a scream.

"My soul!" she cried. "You devil!" She raised herself on her elbow, as if she would get out of bed, and thus confronted him. They looked at each other in an enmity silent yet final, a declaration of war.

The man was a typical tramp, in absolute conformity to what King's End pronounced an awful brotherhood. Not very tall, it could be seen that he was of great strength, and his arms were abnormally long. His face was sallow, surmounted by crisp black hair, covered now by a crow's-nest of a hat. His close, full beard curled tightly, and his eyes held the fire either of fanaticism or an eccentricity not yet classified. The middle part of his face betrayed some lack of natal nobility; the bridge of the nose sank too deeply under the domelike forehead, and the cheek bones were too low. Still, the whole visage held an unusual significance. He carried a little bundle slung over his shoulder, in tramp fashion, and his shirt

collar was open and thrown loosely away from the hairy breast. That Mrs. Horner noticed, with feminine distaste.

He dropped the bundle to the floor. "Well," said he gruffly, "I've come." The old woman was trembling. He noted how her feet shook the counterpane, and his face softened. "Now, don't be scairt," he added. "I never hurt anybody yet."

"Scairt!" snorted Sally Horner passionately. "You need n't trouble yourself. Nobody's afraid o' you here. You never hurt anybody, did ye? Who killed my girl? Who toled her away, an' let her 'most starve to death, an' then crawl home to die? Who was it done that? Who drove me to this bed with grief and sorrier? Some other man, I s'pose!"

Obstinacy settled upon his face.

"I met Eph Cummin's along the road," he said. "He told me what happened. That's why I've come. I've come to see — the baby."

In spite of himself, his voice fell upon the last word. Some of the tenderness of fatherhood dwelt timidly there, unconscious of itself. Mrs. Horner was pulling the counterpane aside with one trembling hand, and dropping it, to fall in folds upon the cradle.

"You want to see the baby?" she echoed,

looking him in the eye to hold his gaze, as the mother partridge flutters to mislead her foe. "Well, you won't see her. What right have you got to lay eyes on her? If you'd married my girl, you'd ha' been the child's father; but now you ain't anybody. You're less'n nobody. Get out o' my house, an' don't you never darken these doors ag'in."

Luke Evans had many enemies within the citadel; one of them was his temper. It rose now, like the taste of blood in the throat.

"I ain't got any rights, ain't I?" he repeated savagely. "We'll see 'f I ain't. I'm the young one's father. What have you got to say to that?"

A little responsive sound came from the cradle, an inarticulate gurgling. The man started, and so did his enemy, — she in terror lest her treasure be discovered, he with a strange distaste for that dubious being, his own, yet not his own. But the woman's fear inspired her to insane attack.

"Get out o' this room!" she cried, over and over again. "You poor, miserable creatur'! there ain't a respectable house in the neighborhood that would take you in. I'd be ashamed to have you found here."

Anger rose and throttled him anew. He

strode around the foot of the bed, and bent over the cradle where the child lay in placid waking; he seized it from its nest, and held it, not untenderly, to his bosom.

"If your house is too good for me, it's too good for my folks," he declared doggedly. "You can say good-by to her. She's comin' up the mountain to live with me." He stooped to pick up his bundle, and, grasping it, the child, and the stick in some uncouth fashion, walked out of the door and up the road toward his waiting home.

For a moment the old woman lay in silence, stunned by the magnitude of her defeat. She could not believe that anything so terrible had happened; yet her imagination was all ready with direful possibilities. It meant nothing short of murder to leave that innocent baby in the hands of a man whom she felt to be without conscience or heart. She lay breathless upon her pillow, hardly knowing, for a time, whether she herself had not died. Then, as her blood resumed its flow, there came, with quickened action, a sense of the necessity of rescue, and she began shrieking aloud, calling impartially upon heaven and earth.

"Obed!" she screamed to her husband, yet knowing it was hardly time for him to be home.

“Obed ! Obed ! he ’s killin’ the baby ! Help ! help ! Murder ! My God ! my God !”

Meantime Luke, his black eyes smouldering with rage, walked furiously along the road, facing this way and that in search of enemies. The hand of every man was against him, but he did not care. There had been nights, known only to God and the stars, when he had lain face downward, in the same dewy fields, and, clutching the earth which had never been for him, cried a man’s hot tears and railed against heaven. But to-day, roused by the palpable, injustice of the world, he heard only the call to battle, and armed himself to keep his foothold because it was denied him. But there were no visible foes to fight. A bluebird, thinking very hopefully of nests, made careless paraphrases, though not to him ; and stalwart robins called so loudly that his ears, used lately to city streets, ached with a delight which was still half homesickness. He passed the roadside smithy where he had built up a brisk little business before he ran away with Milly Horner. It was closed, like his house, and ferns grew to the very door. He thought, with some dull distaste, that now, burdened by a child, he must blow up the fire and get to work again.

All this time he had not looked at the little

warm bundle in his arms. The sense of his own importance, born from his own wrong, filled the visible universe, and the baby was no more than an instrument through which he meant to assert his enmity to the scheme of things. And so he climbed the slope, the more slowly now because he was a third of the way up the mountain, and came, not without a tinge of pleasure, upon his own little dull house in a roadside nook. Here his mother had lived out her anguished life with the husband who kicked both her and Luke impartially ; and here she had died, a month after her tyrant, before she could reconstruct her poor life and learn what it is to tread the earth unterrified. To Luke, the place had become a tragic stage ; not one compensating joy had ever lighted it. He had grown up there in endurance of misery for his mother's sake ; but daily her woe and his own had wrought upon and then corroded him. He caught a sharp breath at sight of the memory-haunted spot, and, drawing a key from his pocket, unlocked the door and went in. He dropped his stick and bundle on the floor, laid the baby on an old calico-covered lounge in the corner, and then went about opening windows. It was a poor place, every article in it threadbare from use ; but at the familiar sight and

feel of things he settled into a semblance of content. When it could be put off no longer, he turned about, like one summoned to an exacting task, went over to the lounge, and looked at the baby. It was a plump baby, very blond and sleek. Luke gazed at her in growing wonder over such curves and dimples, until he caught himself murmuring, —

“I’m glad the little cuss ain’t black, like me!”

But his side of the question was not the only one; for, as he stared at the baby, the baby stared at him. He became vaguely aware that it takes two to make a partnership, and that his daughter had got to be reckoned with. When he stole her, she seemed as impersonal as a pillow; but here she was with a soul looking out of crystalline eyes. And all this time she had not cried.

Luke turned away, embarrassed, and began taking some bread and cheese out of his bundle. He made himself busy about the house, where he was a deft workman; but in the back of his consciousness lurked all the time a sense of this alien presence. He had stolen his own child; but what was he going to do with her?

An hour later, a few stragglers came down the mountain road from the meeting; but none

of them noticed the open windows in the little house. For one thing, the heavy lilacs screened it in front ; and then it had stood so long unoccupied that no one thought of glancing thither. The heads of the women were together, talking over old Elder Kent, telling how Miss Julia, his sister, had failed since the last revival, and how queer it was he should only pray and then dismiss the meeting. Nancy Eliot came last, all by herself, walking with her head high and her gaze exalted. She had taken a renewed resolution that afternoon, and she looked upon herself as one of the Lord's anointed. He had called, and she had answered Him.

She was a young woman, brilliant with the promise of a beauty not yet altogether hers. Somewhat thin, according to the type of lithe New England maids, her figure was straight, well-poised, and made to move in rhythm. Her cheek's pale olive wore a flush that afternoon, partly from rapid walking, and again because Elder Kent had told her something and roused her sympathetic anger. Her eyes were as dark as eyes can be, and her straight hair, braided in an imposing coronal, was black and shining. At first you might have said her features were too severe for an alluring beauty ; but let her face you, and you would see that her upper lip

was short and the cleft above it slightly irregular. Sometimes it betrayed her into a gleam of white teeth when she had not meant to smile, and always it declared her a woman to be sought and followed.

The scent of the lilacs stole out to her beguilingly, and partly to avoid her neighbors but more for love of the spring, she stepped up to the lowest bush and broke a branch. Just as she put it to her face the shriek of an exasperated baby rent the air. Nancy started. She knew very little about such small deer, but the maternal instinct slept in her, ready to stir. If she had heard a child's cry in the village she would have walked on unconcerned; but here, from Luke Evans's old house, it cut the stillness like a plea from the infinite, and she could but listen.

For a whole hour the baby had been stupidly good; but now, as time wore on, and no warm milk found its miraculous way into an ever-greedy stomach, it lifted up the wail of the injured, and would not be comforted. Luke had spent that nervous interval in pottering about the house, and, whenever it was possible, turning his back upon his daughter; now even he became aware that something must be done. So when Nancy, flushed and sweet above her

lilacs, stepped in at the open door, he was on his knees by the lounge, groaning "My gracious, don't! O my Lord! don't!" And the baby was bursting with a crimson rage still deepening into purple. Nancy might not understand the rules of the game, but she had an absolute certainty at that time that she was called of the Lord to meet any given emergency; so she marched forward, dropped her lilacs, and took up the baby, blushing as she did so,—for she realized that any poor married woman, not of heaven's elect, would know better than she how a child ought to be handled. Luke rose to his feet. They had been school-mates, but at that instant she seemed to him a delivering angel.

"Oh, Nancy," he inquired abjectly, "ain't it awful?"

Nancy was already walking up and down, with the child on her shoulder. She cast him a glance in turning. It was sternly reproachful and meant to cover any possible case.

"I should think it was awful," she commented. "Whose baby is it?"

"Mine!"

"Yours?" A flush broke redly upon her cheek, and for an instant he thought she was going to relinquish the child.

"You haven't any right to her at all," she announced. "I'm going to take her straight down to her grandmother."

The old hatred flashed out upon his face and wiped away the softness born to welcome her. He placed himself swiftly before the door.

"No, you ain't," he said doggedly. "That's my property, an' you don't leave the room with it."

"But you were n't" — Nancy hesitated, and her cheeks flamed ruddily.

"We wa'n't married," supplemented Luke. "No, we wa'n't; but I'm that young one's father, an' she belongs to me."

Nancy could not gainsay it; but as she paused by the door, the baby lifted an inexorable voice. So she hastily fell under tyranny, and resumed her walk.

"Well, I don't know anything about it," she said. "All is, I can't hear anything cry so."

Then there befell Luke one of the changes which had caused Milly Horner to see his warmer nature and to love him.

"Oh, Nancy!" he said, "I'll tell you, because you never treated me as if I was the dust under your feet. I'd have told Mis' Horner, only she made me mad. Don't you see, Milly did n't want to be married any more than I did? We

were just as honest and just as good as husband and wife, but we did n't think marryin' was right."

Nancy looked icily away from him. "I don't want to hear about such things," she said. "You were wicked to teach them to her, and you're wicked to stand up for them."

But Luke, from an aching heart, was conscious only of the strange, new relief of opening his lips and speaking the bitterness pent up behind them.

"No, you can't understand it, an' you never would, unless you'd lived the same life as I have. My mother had two husbands, an' they both abused her, my father an' t'other devil. You've heard him called Old Larrups. An' I swore, when I was a boy, I never'd marry a woman an' let her feel she wa'n't free. She should leave me whenever she got ready."

Nancy was still pacing the floor, paying an ostentatious attention to the child, but he could see that she was listening.

"I told Milly so," he went on, in the passionate warmth of self-pity, "an' she liked me, an' she said keepin' true to each other was better than if we'd promised it. She knew I did n't believe in ministers an' the Bible an' " —

"If you are going to say you don't believe in

God," said Nancy, with accusing lips, "I shall go. It's blasphemy, and it's wicked for me to listen."

"An' I made her happy, Nancy, truly I did! but I lost my place, an' then I had to leave her, an' find another, an' she went kind o' crazy with the baby comin' an' all, an' run away home. An' then you see I'd got work, but I couldn't make enough to send for her to come on; an' when I was 'most wore out waitin' to hear from her, I give up my job an' went back, an' there were the letters I'd sent her, — an' the money in 'em, — an' she gone! An' a note from old Mis' Horner, cussin' me, an' sayin' Milly was dead. So I didn't come here till I got sick o' livin', an' then I did, an' there was the baby." His voice broke, and he put his hands to his eyes.

"Oh, don't!" cried the girl swiftly. "Here! take this." She pressed her handkerchief into his fingers, and began singing to the child. Luke looked at the little square of linen and then put it down on the table. He dashed at his eyes furtively with the back of his hand, and laid his passion by.

"Here, Nancy," he said gently, "you let me take it. I see how you do it. I'll walk a spell."

The baby had subsided into an exasperated

silence, and Nancy placed her in his outstretched arms.

"Got a bowl?" she asked, "or a pitcher? I'll take this yellow nappy. And don't you say any more wicked things. I won't listen to 'em. I suppose you get 'em out of there!" She turned scornfully to a shelf of books by the mantel, and Luke followed her gaze most humbly. Then she sped out of the door and was back again before long, bearing the nappy daintily, for it was full of milk.

Her face was flushed now with the happy excitement of a clever thought well executed. She looked very womanly in her pretty haste.

"You sit down and hold her," she directed him. "Maybe I can feed her out of a spoon."

Luke, quite overcome by the rapid changes in the situation, obeyed with meekness. He took the old rocker, and held the child flat upon his knees, loosely but resolutely pinioning her hands in one of his, with some idea of her potency to outwit him. Nancy knelt before them and administered milk from a spoon. When the child swallowed conformably, she could not help looking up at Luke with a smile which he was ready to answer; and when it choked, they felt the tragedy. Sometimes the milk ran in little runnels into the creasy neck; but it did

come about finally that the deed was accomplished and the baby at rest. Nancy rose, sighing with relief. She set the nappy on the table and wiped the front of her dress.

"Now I must go," she said decisively. "I guess she ought to have some more, pretty soon. You can warm what's left."

Luke looked at her in helpless dismay. They had seemed so truly companions in fighting a common misfortune that he had forgotten what it would be to meet the situation alone. An old hunger stirred in him, older even than his love for Milly, and never really recognized because Nancy Eliot was the chosen of another man. Against his will, he spoke with an involuntary jealousy: —

"I heard hammerin' at the new house when I come along. I s'pose it's 'most ready for you to move into."

She was angry at once, and for some reason her anger pleased him.

"I'm not going into any new houses," she answered.

A warmth of relief enfolded him, and, moved by it unawares, he smiled. When had he smiled before to-day?

"Ain't you goin' to marry him?" he ventured, watching her.

"I'm not going to marry anybody," said Nancy, not sharply, as she wished to speak, but with the dignity of one set aside for loftier purposes. "Now, are you going to feed her when I'm gone?"

"Do they have to eat often?" he asked weakly.

"Yes; I don't know how often, but they do. And they have to have one cow's milk. This was old Specky's. Our cows are up here in the mountain pasture. You'd better milk her again, before they're driven down. She's the only one with nubs on her horns. I'll tell mother I told you to."

"If I do that, I'll pay for it; I've got money. But, Nancy, how often has she got to eat?"

Put to the test, Nancy hedged a little.

"I'll ask mother to come up after supper," she promised haltingly. "If she can't come, I'll find out and come myself."

She turned, in swift decision, and walked out of the house. Only the lilacs were left, and Luke had stepped on them in his perfunctory marching. Absently he lifted them and inhaled their fragrance, while the baby looked at him vacuously.

Meantime Nancy, feeling the vitality of the world and certain that she was very much

needed in it, stepped hastily on down the hill; but she had not gone far when Fate knocked again at the door. A young man was lounging against the stone wall, and from the haste with which he came forward at sight of her, evidently waiting for that very purpose. He was extremely handsome in an old-fashioned way, with the distinguished nose and well-cut lips of some young patriot of an elder time, though a humorous quirk at the corners of his mouth released him from the burden of too great a destiny. His heavy light hair was brushed straight back from his forehead. Nancy was conscious of a thrill at sight of him, and frowned at her own pulses. It was only, she reflected then, because he looked so much like the pictures in the history, not in the least because she liked him.

"'Afternoon, Nancy," he called, with a bluff lack of ceremony. "You're late. All the folks went by half an hour ago. I begun to think you must be among the goats."

"I was — detained," said Nancy briefly, hardly looking at him now.

She was going on when he called, "Wait a minute," with a half-veiled authority, to be resented and then obeyed. "I want you to come up to the new house. I've got to ask you some-

thing. The workmen can't go ahead till they're told."

"The idea!" cried Nancy. "I don't know anything about houses."

"Oh yes, you do," he returned, with confidence. "You know this. A man could n't settle it."

"Then ask your mother."

"Mother's in a tantrum. I have n't spoken a word to her for a week. She won't put up her ear trumpet. Come along, Nancy, or I shall have to tell the carpenters why they've got to knock off."

"Very well," said Nancy, trying to act as if she acceded of her own free will. "If I can be of any assistance to you!"

Martin Jeffries smiled. He knew her habit of using long words when she was offended or when she was afraid of him, and either mood was better than a calm estate. He turned with her into a grass-grown driveway at the right, and they went on in silence. At the end of its winding length was the cellar of the old Whit-tredge estate, and this spring Martin had bought the place and begun to put up a new house. Even at this stage it looked very dignified and comfortable, built with simplicity on a colonial model. They went up the rough steps together,

and he offered his hand to help her over the sill. But it was an unnecessary courtesy, and she refused it, gathered her skirts away from the shavings, and stepped into a broad hall, illumined now, in the mellowness of new wood, by the sunset light traveling through from the front door to the back. The clean smell of lumber pervaded it, and a girl who had gone there with her lover, knowing the house was for them, would have looked her delight. Even upon Nancy a new tranquillity seemed suddenly to fall. She felt more at rest, as, even though unconsciously, she always did when Martin was near.

"It's about the kitchen I wanted to ask you," he said indifferently. "But come in here a minute first. The parlor fireplace is done. Like it?"

It was capacious, deep, and delightful in simplicity. Two iron firedogs stood ready, and Nancy noted the carefully laid sticks, birch with curling bark, over a foundation of cones.

"Why, you've fixed a fire!" she said in surprise.

"Yes," returned Martin carelessly. He was striking a match. "Light it while I sweep these shavings away. Let's see if it draws."

He stepped behind her, but without sweeping

at all. Instead, he looked down upon her while she knelt, with a swift, feminine motion, and set the match to the wood. Flames darted gloriously and curled about the birch, and Nancy, forgetful of the place, knelt still and dreamed about the future. But it was of herself alone she dreamed, and of what she was pleased to think God wished her to do. A long sigh startled her. She rose in haste, to find Martin watching her with passionate eyes. Involuntarily she retreated, and her own glance hardened. It turned her icy when he looked at her like that.

"There, dear," he murmured, "you did it for me. Don't you see why? They wanted to heat up, to dry off, but I could n't have it done till you'd lighted your own fire first. In your own house, Nancy!" He stretched out his arms to her as if sure she would come to them. That strange authority invariably made her flee. Her "no" meant nothing. He turned it into "yes."

"Then it was only a trick," she said angrily. "You pretend to like me, and you torment me all you can."

He was still gazing at her, that dreamy invitation in his eyes. His hands fell.

"Oh no, dearest!" he said. "Only you know you're going to live here with me in this

very house. Why, even the house knows ! Two winters ago when I cut the lumber, cold days up on the mountain, I used to tell the trees. Then while the boards were seasoning, I sat on them and smoked and talked about it. And now you've lit your own fire !"

Nancy trembled. That strange tenderness of his always frightened her. It seemed like none of the men there in the village who went to church with their wives and shamefacedly called them "she." His persecution was hateful to her, and she had never, since her earliest girlhood, been without it. But now some sense that the situation was a crucial one roused her to end it.

"Look here, Martin Jeffries," she said, "if that's what you think of me, you might as well stop thinking. I shan't ever marry anybody."

Two bright little imps were smiling in his eyes. "Oh no, I hope not," he said soothingly, "nobody but me. I ain't anybody."

Nancy hardened in her resolve. "I'll tell you something," she went on, "only you must n't tell. I have n't even broken it to mother yet. When Elder Kent goes away from here, I'm going with him and Miss Julia — to preach."

His eyes opened wide. She had never really

surprised him before. "Holy poker!" he remarked. "What for?"

"I am called," answered Nancy, with a certain exaltation. "I am called — of God."

Martin stood very silent for a few moments, looking at the floor. His hands were in his pockets and he whistled a stave.

"I've often wished you did n't have so much to do with God," he said musingly. "It ain't healthy."

"I wish you would n't say ain't," flashed Nancy, from the sting of an old irritation.

He smiled at her with a transforming radiance. "I won't, if you'll stay at home and be a good girl."

She was finding her way to the door.

"I've had it in mind for over two years," she said, — "ever since I cherished a hope. But I could n't do it till father's old debt was paid off. Now it's all done but twenty dollars, and I've got that laid by. So I'm going."

"Well, I'm glad you mentioned it," returned Martin cheerfully, kicking stray boards out of the way to follow her, "because now I can hurry up the house. Of course, you knew I'd go too."

"You need n't say anything you don't mean," remarked Nancy, with dignity.

"Oh, I mean it all right! You're leading

•

me an awful dance, Nancy ; but when we're old folks and sit here side of the fire, it'll be something to mull over. Oh, hold on a minute ! I want you to look into the kitchen ; I do truly. Should you rather have the flour barrel in the pantry, or a little cubby built for it in one corner ? ”

“ You can ask your mother, or whoever's going to make your bread.”

She went swiftly away down the path, and Martin looked after her until she neared the turn ; then he went in again, because she was too precious to be watched out of sight. His face, transfigured by emotion which there was now no reason for concealing, took on a spiritual beauty rare enough to have amazed the girl who flouted him. He was quite willing that she should see his soul ; yet how could it walk forth in the eyes of scorn ? He waited musing by the fire until the coals had smouldered, and then went home to smile in a different way at his mother, and coax her into some sort of human fellowship.

Nancy walked away, angrily conscious of what she called her lower nature. She was aware of having started from the mountain in a very elevated frame of mind. Luke Evans had jarred it but little, for her sense of beneficence had

carried her triumphantly out of his door ; but Martin, as he always did, had contrived to set her on that very human and commonplace plane which she was always trying to avoid. By the time she reached the good old farmhouse where she and her mother lived, with Aunt Lindy to keep them company, she was practically cross ; the more so because, when she entered the kitchen, no supper was apparent, though the fire was burning briskly, and three women stood there in the attitude of gossip unfinished. First there was her mother, tall, gaunt, with smoothly banded black hair and long gold earrings, then Aunt Lindy, a marvel of contented flesh, and Joan Macpherson, old Mrs. Horner's help, the bearer of tidings. Joan's forbears came from Prince Edward's Island, but she prided herself upon being Yankee born, and eradicated, so far as she might, all the tricks of speech to which ancestry entitled her. She was a giantess, with red hair, — a woman of great endurance and a canny mind.

“ So she screamed herself into fits, — an' that hoarse ! ” she was saying. “ An' Mr. Horner an' me happened to get there the same time. ‘ Be you sick ? ’ says he. ‘ No, ’ says she. ‘ The baby's stole an' murdered. ’ Then I minded how I dropped my dishcloth this mornin', an' I

groaned. She tried to throw the Bible at me for fear I'd get in a word" —

"The Bible!" ejaculated Aunt Lindy meekly, casting her eyes heavenward. "I want to know!"

"An' she would have it Mr. Horner must gether together the neighbors an' go up the mountain an' get the baby back, alive or dead. But he took a drink out o' the dipper an' said he did n't know how the law lay, an' he never heard of a man claimin' that kind of a child before. But if he wanted it, he guessed he had a right to it; an' then she screamed — seems if I could hear her now! — an' says to me, 'You go over to Judge Hill's an' ask him what the law is.'"

"I guess so! The law!" repeated Aunt Lindy admiringly.

"I started," said Joan. She stood in statue-like repose, her great arms folded. "I met a cat on the way, an' I never turned back. A cat's bad luck. An' when I got to Judge Hill's he'd had another stroke an' two doctors over him. So I come home. Then Mis' Horner she made me carry the word to the selec'men, an' they're goin' up along after supper to see if they can get the baby away. An' that's where it lays now."

"Forever!" breathed Aunt Lindy.

"Well, I never heard such doin's myself," said Mrs. Eliot, "trying" the oven. "Nancy, you set the table."

Nancy had taken off her hat, and stood, very cool and superior, by the three agitated women. It seemed to her that she only grasped the situation.

"Mrs. Horner need n't be afraid anything will happen to the baby," she said. "I've just seen it."

"Seen it!" echoed the three together, Aunt Lindy in a soft staccato, easily overborne.

"Yes; I heard it cry when I came along down. So I went in. And I milked old Specky and fed it. I told him he might milk Specky every day, mother," she continued, drawing out the table and beginning to spread the cloth. "I thought it had got to have one cow's milk."

She seemed to make the transaction a matter of course. It was dizzying. There was the baby in a state of siege, to be attacked by the selectmen after supper, and here was Nancy talking about one cow's milk. Even Big Joan was impressed. She turned silently away.

"Well, I'll tell Mis' Horner," said she, and went homeward. Susan Eliot looked at her daughter hopelessly, as she often did when

Nancy took unfamiliar paths with no apparent inkling of their character.

"I guess the baby's got to stay there," continued Nancy, as she went on setting the table. "I promised you'd come up after supper and tell him how often she ought to be fed."

"Well, I guess I shan't," returned Mrs. Eliot, drawing her biscuit tin out of the oven for a nearer scrutiny. "You was too hasty, Nancy. I ain't goin' to stir up any kind of a neighborhood brew."

Long before reaching her present stature, Nancy, by virtue of godly living, had become the head of the house, and this unexpected revolt was amazing to her. For a moment she went on working, with a little irritated flush upon her cheeks. Then she said rather meekly, "I asked Elder Kent and Miss Julia to stay with us. Was that wrong, too?"

"Why, no, of course not! I put in extry biscuits a-purpose. When will they be down along? 'Fore supper?"

"Oh yes! He only waited to talk with two young men from Pillcott way. They came to make a disturbance. He's had an awful time, mother. He told me about it. They had him up last week for breaking the peace. So this time he only prayed and sung."

When Mrs. Eliot went into the shed for some light wood, Nancy followed her.

"Mother, wait a minute," she began. "Here, don't pick up the limbs yet ; I want to speak to you." Mrs. Eliot confronted her, a capable figure, moulded by work and its perplexities. "Mother, I've got something to tell you."

She was so moved, in some subtle way, that Mrs. Eliot scented the secret, and gave her a reassuring nod.

"Is it about Martin Jeffries?" she asked, from that shyness with which the women of the village were accustomed to treat love and its outcome. "I'm real pleased."

Nancy's softer mood settled into a crystal. "I don't know why it should be about Martin Jeffries," she said coldly. "It's got nothing to do with him. It's only that I've promised Elder Kent to go off with them, preaching. I feel called."

Mrs. Eliot was mechanically holding up her apron with its few gathered chips. She dropped it, and the kindling rattled to her feet. "How long do you mean to be gone?" she asked.

Nancy trembled a little. "Always," she said. "Mother, I am called."

"Well, then, that's all there is about it," returned Mrs. Eliot, and again she began picking

up her wood. An observer, unused to the ways of New England life, would have said she did not care. Nancy saw that she was moved to the soul. But not for that reason could she yield. She was leaving mother and home for a greater sake, and warmer even than any filial pang was her sense of being set apart and consecrated. Yet she did at the moment feel a passionate sorrow for her mother: that egotistical pity of youth unable to conceive how age is going to exist without the solace of its brightness.

"Oh, mother! don't you carry the wood! You let me!" she cried, sweeping the load from Susan's apron into hers, though usually she ignored that "Irish basket" of immemorial usage. It was an untidy makeshift, thought Nancy.

"I'm afraid the oven will all cool off," said Mrs. Eliot, and they went in together, sorrowful but composed, the one hungry for pity and yet not putting out her hand, the other aching with sympathy and unschooled in showing it. So the preparations for supper went on, and when the biscuits were overbrowned in waiting, a man and woman came down the mountain road and stopped at the door. King's End was familiar with the pair, and seeing them pass, only paused long enough at the window to remark, "There

goes the Elder and Julia ; " but to unaccustomed eyes they were strollers escaped from some eccentric stage. Both were old, and both were vigorous, like all who live chiefly in sun and wind. The man was slender and strong, of no great height, and his white beard fell waving and silky almost to his waist. White hair swept back from his great forehead, and his nose had the line of a delicate length. Dark eyes lay almost hidden in their sockets, shaded by black brows so thick and straight that their profile haunted you. His clothes were a decent, shiny black, mended with such exquisite workmanship as to make a separate art of darning. His sister, shorter than he, was yet cast in a sterner mould. Her nose held an aquiline strength, her black eyes an unresting fire. Even her hair, white like his own, was coarser, and curled with a rough and willful energy. She too wore black, preserved with the same thrift. The thin silk of her *visite* was darned in many places, and she twisted herself from time to time in walking, to cast an anxious glance at a new rent in her skirt, where the blackberry thorns still clung. She carried a neat little parcel, and he an old-fashioned carpet-bag. This was their traveling gear for the unbroken wandering of their chosen life.

"Dear me suz!" remarked Susan, when they came in sight. "Set on the biscuits, Nancy. I'd 'most give 'em up."

At the threshold the Elder raised his hands in benediction, and immediately a hush fell upon the women within. Like others who were accustomed to his eccentric ways, the two older ones thought lightly of him as "half-crazed," yet they could never free themselves from the awe of his presence.

"Peace be upon this house!" he said, and waited while his sister shook hands with her hostess and Aunt Lindy.

"I hope we haven't put you out," she said, with a smiling grace. She was used to making that apology. It tripped from her lips now without consideration. The Elder kept no note of times and seasons, and she was ever trotting on behind him to keep his credit by a melting word. Susan was far too conscientious to protest, but, mentally conceding the delay, she added, "It ain't any put-out at all," and hurried them off to their bedrooms. It was always more or less exciting to entertain the Elder and his sister, for Miss Julia brought pages of harmless gossip from a dozen villages, and retailed it brightly. She it was who earned their daily bread by such social garnishing, as well as

by the work of her hands, and she shrewdly knew her value. Fidelity to the Elder's calling was not always sufficient to buy him a week's board; but few housewives could resist the appeal of Miss Julia's graces and her practiced thrift.

The Elder, withdrawn in meditation, sat in silence through the meal, and Julia, tasting her tea delicately, seemed the great lady of the occasion, supping by gracious accord with those to whom she had much to give. Mrs. Eliot asked low-toned questions about the folks at Cumnor, and Aunt Lindy, albeit fond of "sweet trade," forgot to pass the cake in her desire to hear whether plaits or gathers were worn in Ryde. But Nancy ate her supper with a careful dignity, copying the silence of the man whom she had elected to follow. Every moment with him was to her mind instinct with spiritual charm. After supper he withdrew to the garden, and paced up and down, still in meditation, while Mrs. Eliot told Miss Julia the story of the stolen baby. Nancy spoke no word, but when the tale was ended, she called from her dish-washing at the sink :—

"Mother, I think you might tell me what to say to him about feeding. I'm going up, after I've finished these."

"I declare, Nancy," answered her mother, brushing up the hearth, "you do seem to be bewitched. There! I've scorched this turkey wing, an' I knew I should. You can go ask Mis' Horner, if you've got to have your finger in it. I ain't goin' to interfere."

"I said I'd run up and tell him," returned Nancy, with that sedateness which even her adorers found exasperating; "so I must."

"Oh, there they come! there they come!" cried Aunt Lindy huskily, from the window. "There's the selec'men an' 'most the whole township with 'em."

Perhaps twenty men and boys were straggling up the road, led in a self-conscious majesty by two selectmen, the third being away trading cattle.

"There's William Kane an' Owen Henry," enumerated Mrs. Eliot from her outlook, "an' one, two, three, four — well, I guess most o' the neighborhood's there. I wonder the women did n't jine in."

"I wisht they had," murmured Aunt Lindy. "I could n't ha' clim' up there myself, but I'd like to hear Big Joan set it out to-morrer."

"So you see, Nancy, you need n't mix yourself up in it," remarked Susan as the rout went resolutely by, the boys a-grin and the men quite

shamefaced over a doubtful quest. "You see they're going to bring the baby safe home to its grandmother."

"They won't get it," said Nancy. "But I shan't go up till they've gone away."

"Don't you mind; she shan't go alone," whispered Miss Julia, nodding at Susan. "I'll go up with her myself after this to-do is over. There! the Elder's seen 'em and joined in. I'd full as lieve's he'd gone to bed in peace to-night." Fine lines of an old anxiety wrinkled her forehead, and she craned forward to watch them out of sight.

"He'll pray with them before they come home," said Nancy raptly. "That's what he's going to do."

II

KING'S END knew well how forlorn a hope it led in charging under the banner of these two selectmen ; for, as Eph Cummings said at starting, "The only man among 'em was the one that wa'n't there." Without him, the office had but the potency of a "wet rag." William Kane, a spare farmer with a lean, stubbly cheek and sweeping chin-beard, was the apostle of expediency. Owen Henry had always been regarded with distaste by the fastidious, because of his color, dark as that of a half-breed, or, as Big Joan supplemented with a traveled scorn, "one of them low Canucks." He was short and very square. His beard, even when closely shaven, seemed to have dyed his cheeks, and the coarse black hair rose like bristles above his forehead. A nice man enough, said the village, but he had n't got much "seem" to him. Obed Horner brought up the rear, a little fellow with a round and innocent face and a fringe of whisker. One might have called him the most indifferent of all ; yet his mouth worked nervously, and his

light eyes were still moist with tears. After greeting the Elder, they tramped on up the country road, all the more aware, in their silence, of the sounds of spring. Frogs were still peeping down in the pond below the turn, and two or three had begun the long, high recitative of newborn love. The whippoorwill cried melodiously from a neighboring copse, and then whirred nearer and cried again.

"Consarn them birds!" said Eph Cummings. He was a citizen so soft-hearted as not willingly to "hurt a fly." "I wish all the whippoorwills in the State o' New Hampshire had one neck an' I could wring it."

"Bad sign!" agreed William Kane in his soothing cadence. "Yes, I've al'ays heerd so. Bad sign!"

"I should n't care what it's a sign of, if I could make 'em shet up," said Eph. Then becoming aware that a younger generation was listening, he added hastily, "There! there! boys, don't you never touch 'em. I guess they don't do no hurt."

The little black house was in sight now, and the scent of lilacs lay upon the air.

"He ain't got no light," whispered a boy. But the windows were open, though the door had long been locked. The selectmen halted,

and their guard shuffled to a pause. The Elder, still in the rear, lifted his hands, and his lips formed in the darkness the inaudible benediction, "Peace be upon this house!"

"Goin' in?" asked Owen of his colleague, in a stertorous whisper. William Kane scraped his lean cheek and caressed his beard.

"Might as well knock on the door," he remarked. "That can't do no hurt."

"What is it?" cracked a voice from the window. The men in advance fell back upon the feet behind them. But courage was not extinct here in King's End. The dignity of the law revived, and the deputation swayed forward. William Kane nudged his companion, but Owen only breathed loudly in reply. So William essayed the onslaught.

"That you, Luke?" he called cheerfully. "That you? Well, I declare! Got home, ain't ye?"

The dark was coming quickly, but they could discern the outline of a head at the window. A boy said afterwards that its eyes were live coals, "jes' like a cat's." But that evidence was never heeded, save by one credulous mother.

"What's the meanin' o' this?" called Luke sharply. "What you all up here for?"

Obed Horner had lingered in the background.

He was a shy man, and the disgrace of his daughter's return seemed to him cruelly augmented by this further scandal. But now desperation provoked him to speech, and he pressed forward.

"I 'll tell ye what 's the matter, Luke Evans," he asserted passionately. "You 've stole a baby out o' my house, an' we've come up here to carry it home ag'in. An' here's the selec'men an' all."

Even the childishness of this last appeal could not entirely efface its dignity. Obed loved the baby, perhaps more tenderly than if it had come into the world well heralded. He was a partisan.

"The baby 's mine," returned Luke. "I'm her father. Anybody got anything to say ag'inst a man's claimin' his own child?"

Obed pressed close to the selectmen. "Can't you answer suthin'?" he whispered desperately.

Silence fell, and then the whippoorwill, flying nearer, began his flouting in their very ears.

"Consarn that bird!" muttered Eph again. "Can't some o' you boys creep round the back o' the shed an' kind o' shoo him away?"

But not even a boy would forego the fearful joy of the coming dialogue. So still was it that

each man could hear his neighbor breathing. Two or three could count the thumping of their hearts.

"Well, now, Luke," said William Kane, in a lively manner, "there ain't a mite o' use takin' it hard, all among neighbors so, — but it's understood — it's been understood for quite a while — that you an' Milly wa'n't man an' wife."

"You can understand it all over ag'in," returned Luke, unmoved. "We wa'n't married. An' this baby's ourn."

The Elder came suddenly forward and stepped close up to the window, from which the others were keeping at a prudent length. His face was on a level with the visage within.

"But now," he said, "you are ready to marry her, poor girl!"

Obed Horner pressed forward a step, a sob in his throat. "She's dead, Elder," said he, like a child. "My girl's dead. It's too late to make it up to her; she's dead an' gone."

Luke also felt the pathos of the moment; it stirred him to a deeper rage. He was conscious of the dumb protest of one who has taken a stand against the world only because the world has forced him into it. Here he stood, at bay against his judges.

"Yes, she's dead," he agreed bitterly. "An' if she was alive, she'd been glad enough to stan' here with me an' face the whole pack on ye. Now look here! if a child's born out o' wedlock, don't ye go round tryin' to find a father for it an' make him support it? Well, you ain't had to hunt much for me. I'm here. An' I say this is my child, an' I'm goin' to take care of it an' bring it up; an' if anybody gits in my way, let him stand from under! That's all."

The Elder put out his hand.

"Good for you, brother," he said warmly. "You speak like a man."

Luke, prepared only for warfare, stared at him, and Obed Horner gave a little dissuading cry:—

"Look here, Elder, you'll upset the whole b'ilin'! You let the selec'men speak."

But the selectmen were not ready, whereas Luke had his argument prepared.

"I've loaded my old musket," he continued grimly. "She sets right here in this corner; an' if anybody tries to break into my house an' interfere with my family, I'll open on 'em. That's all I've got to say. What's mine's mine. You let me alone, an' I'll let you alone."

The Elder faced rapidly about. "Friends," said he, "the man may not be right according

to law, but he thinks he is right. He means to do his duty by his own. He hopes to make up to the child what he owed the mother."

"It's no such a thing!" called Luke, exasperated by a predicament from which he was too obstinate to withdraw. "I've got nothin' to make up. I done my best by Milly Horner, an' I come back to King's End as peaceable as a lamb. Eph told me about the baby, an' I meant to look at it, an' then foot it up here, an' crawl into a hole an' suck my claws. An' if old Mis' Horner'd ha' treated me decent, I'd ha' done it. But you can't call a man a dog an' he not snap at ye. So I've took my stan', an' I'm goin' to hold to it; an' anybody 't interferes with me'll git a charge o' shot." His face faded away from the dusky square, and they heard him stepping about within. No one moved, but Owen Henry and William Kane whispered together. The face appeared again at the window.

"It's gittin' late for callers," remarked Luke dryly. "I guess it's time for you folks to disperse. If you don't, I may have to disperse ye." And King's End, still headed by its selectmen, turned about and followed the example of the King of France.

But the Elder stayed. He fell on his knees there by the cinnamon rosebush near the door.

Luke stood at the window and looked down upon the white head uplifted toward the night. His lips curled with the scorn of one who watches an innocent mummary. As the Elder rose, Luke stepped softly away from the window, having had enough of talk ; but the old man, not regarding him, walked broodingly into the dark. He did not, like the others, return to the village ; he climbed the mountain slope to a pasture which was wont to be his place of meditation. Stars and great sky spaces were his counselors. He remembered Him who went into a mountain apart.

Meantime the little train, on its way downhill, talked not at all, though the boys, forgetting even to scuffle or to exchange more than a furtive cuff, cast inquiring glances at their elders. Obed at his gate turned for an instant, and lamented, like an injured child :—

“An’ Owen Henry never spoke one word ! Neighbors, I’m obleeged to ye.”

Then he sought his wife, and sat by her bedside all night, silent but mindful of her ungoverned grief. Joan Macpherson she would not have. Her red-brown eyes distended in hysterical anguish. She talked incessantly, and Obed afterwards at his work used sometimes to shudder over the memory of her ravings.

"Well, Lord have mercy on us," he would say, straightening himself to lean on his hoe and look at the ground, trying anew to be convinced that his God was one who remembereth that we are dust.

Nancy and her mother, with Miss Julia, were at the gate when the troop went by.

"Got the baby?" called Mrs. Eliot.

Eph Cummings shook his head gloomily. "Won't give it up!"

"I told you so," said Nancy. "Mother, I've got to go up there. I said I would. Don't you want to go too?"

Her voice had no imploring notes, but Susan understood it. That suggestion carried the weight of an appeal. Her heart yielded, but she clung perforce to rural usage. She could not interfere. "I ain't goin' to meddle nor make," she returned unhappily. "It's no concern o' mine, nor yourn either. Let's all come in an' git to bed in good season."

But Nancy stepped out into the road, and gathered her skirts about her. She felt the holy elevation of a martyr.

"Don't you worry," whispered Miss Julia in Susan's ear. "I'll go with her. I've got an errand of my own." And she too melted away into the night.

Susan Eliot stood for a moment, watching the dusky shapes lessen up the hill, and then, with a long sigh, went back to the front steps, where she sat and meditated. She was well used to the irritation of this inward protest against natures unlike her own. Her husband had taken these byways of action wherein she could never follow him, and now Nancy was developing the same exasperating individuality.

The two went silently up the hill. There was no moon, and now the dusk was night indeed, and fell upon them heavily. Nancy, never afraid until this summer, was conscious of its power. She walked softly, yet ashamed of her own caution, and when a branch put out an arresting finger, she started aside, with a little cry. But Julia, used to lone vigils beside her brother when the spirit was upon him, and to miles of tramping between daylight and dawn, went on like a sinewy soldier. Nothing was more familiar to her now than the uncouth shadows of night, its phantasmal sky; and, like those born to the darkness, she seemed to feel her way through it by a sense more acute than seeing.

"It was real good of you to come," said Nancy, in a whisper.

But Julia, unawed by the silence, made answer

clearly : " I wanted to. It gave me an excuse."

" Oh ! " breathed Nancy, stopping short, " what 's that ? "

High up from the mountain pasture a sound came ebbing down. It was the voice of prayer, chanted with great and musical strength.

" It 's brother," said Miss Julia, " praying in the dark."

Nancy laughed a little, nervously. " I might have known," she said, drawing a quick breath ; " I 've heard him so many times. But somehow it was so sudden ! It 's so awful ! "

The voice went pealing on. It fell into Biblical utterance, and, like John the Baptist's, cried " Repent ! " until the echoing wood returned the word uncannily.

Nancy, tired with the day and excited by its drama, held herself firmly, lest she sob. She was ashamed to be so dominated. " Here we are," she said at length. " I guess he 's gone to bed."

The little dark house was still. Luke had listened for her, as he lay in his bedroom, but his aching body, tired with three days' tramping, was too much for him. While he listened, he fell asleep.

The two women stood still in the lilac shadow.

Julia put out her hands, and gathering great bunches of the blossoms to her face, laid her aching eyes upon them. She had cried that afternoon some of the terrible tears of old age, — alone, like a hurt animal in the sedge. Only some impersonal touch like this could heal her.

“I guess we shall have to go back again,” whispered Nancy, at length. “If the baby’s asleep, she’s all right. We don’t want to wake her.”

They stepped softly away, pausing at intervals to listen. Halfway down the road Julia spoke, putting a hand on the girl’s arm. “Should you just as soon run home alone? I’m going to clip it over the pasture here to the Cumnor Road. I shall be in by the time brother is. You just leave the door for us.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Nancy. Her courage had returned ; and proud always of her own strength, she liked to justify it, even to herself. “Here’s the gap in the wall.”

But Julia still detained her. “You can go,” said she. “I’d like you to go. I don’t know what I shall find. But you mustn’t ever tell. It’s my business, and you mustn’t ever.”

“No, I won’t tell,” said Nancy. She stepped through the gap, and Julia followed lightly.

They were in a rolling pasture with pines in

irregular patches, black now under the weight of night. Nancy remembered how a line of firs on a ridge beyond had often made an iron fret-work against the sunset sky ; now they were an impassable wall builded of darkness. The whip-poorwill began in the distance, uncannily changing his resting place, as if he fled from some tormenting memory. No ears country born can hear that sound without a thrill, and for an instant Nancy's inexplicable fear returned upon her. But she put it by, and said clearly, —

“ I told mother to-night.”

“ What ? ”

“ About going with you.”

“ Don't you do it, Nancy, don't you do it ! ” The woman spoke passionately, yet as if her mind dwelt also on another thing. “ Do you want to be a gypsy and wander up and down the face of the earth ? ”

“ I want to serve God.” If the words had been meant for Martin, they might have rung false, from self-consciousness and the fear of his laughter ; but the night had washed them clean.

“ Then be a good girl, and marry a man that wants you, and take care of him. Serve God ! you don't have to tear yourself all to pieces to do it ! ”

They were rapidly feeling their way along the trail, sometimes stumbling aside in the darkness, and then finding it anew. Nancy was ahead ; but at this false doctrine, she stopped an instant, and turned upon her companion before going on again. All her life she had known the woman who was following her with these unerring steps, but never as she seemed to-night. It was as if Julia had laid aside a mask, and appeared for a moment in the reckless guise of worldly wisdom. She had never been accounted religious in the fanatical fashion of the Elder, but her devotion to him had worn the aspect of consecration. She did not exhort, nor did she even join his impromptu services. Sometimes she sat with her hands dropped idly in her lap while he preached and prayed ; but that she followed him seemed ample proof of her own delight in holiness. Nancy opened her lips once or twice in astonished combat of a heterodoxy too bewildering even to be denied. So in silence they hurried on and over another remembered "easy place" in the wall, out into the Cumnor Road. Nancy paused.

"Which way ?" she asked.

Julia turned to the left. This was a wider road than that of little King's End, the great highway leading down to Ryde. Bordered by

well-to-do maples, it was airy and light by day, always with a pleasant breeze blowing. The houses were larger here, and the yards fronting upon the road wore almost an air of town munificence. Julia, leading the way, turned in at an open gate set in a fence of chains, held at intervals by the mouths of little iron horses. Nancy remembered how those horses had delighted her childish days, when the Cumnor Road seemed to her the one way into the world.

"It's Judge Hill's!" she said involuntarily, as they went up the gravel drive. Miss Julia did not answer her, and Nancy ventured an arresting touch upon her dress. "Miss Julia," she reminded her, "he's sick. Did n't you know it? He's had two strokes."

"I heard of it," said Julia steadily, like one who has faced the reality of grief until its mention hurts no more. "You stand here by this bush and keep still. I'll be back. If I have to stay, I'll come and tell you."

Nancy fell into the shadow of a great syringa and watched her while she went noiselessly on, avoiding the path now, and choosing the softer turf. One window of the great white house, imposing in its pillared front, was brightly lighted, and an agitated gleam was moving from room to room. Nancy knew there were watch-

ers within. She saw Julia stop, slip her shoes from her feet, and then creep softly along the piazza, turning the corner at the side. There she lost her.

Julia, in her stocking-feet, skirted the south side of the house where the apple orchard stretched its bowery length and paused before one of the long windows. It was open into a capacious bedroom ; and there, with a watcher at either side, his sister and the village nurse, lay Judge Hill in the helplessness of his stricken state. His head rested high upon pillows, and the distinguished outline of his face, from the great forehead down to the noble chin, seemed to bear already the dignity of death. His sister, of an old-fashioned type, with her delicate outline, curls, and side-combs, had been used to keep the consistency of her years with sober silks and sheer sprigged muslins ; now she wore a cambric dress and long white apron. It was her concession to present duty ; to one who knew her ways of life, it made the Judge's case a desperate one.

Julia's gaze dwelt upon the sick man with a hunger so intense that when his eyelids trembled, and the watchers bent over him, she caught her breath and drew backward, as if she had called upon him too insistently. But he did not

waken ; and after one of the women had moistened his lips they settled themselves to their silent vigil, and she, bending forward again, fed with an unregarded anguish on the scene. Once she noted, with a quick glance, the old-fashioned appointments of the room : the landscape paper, the high-boy, the shining andirons in the fireplace, and the bed itself, with its canopy frame above. It was as if she stole a look at some sacred spot, to store the sight for memory. But her eyes returned to dwell upon his face. Once he lifted his right hand, and opened his eyes. He regarded the hand curiously, and then put it over and touched the helpless left one. His lips framed a syllable.

"Air?" repeated the nurse. She rose, glancing at the window. Julia fell back, and then, at the sound of the moving sash, slipped along the piazza and down the steps. She put on her shoes and, still cautiously, made her way to the syringa bush. There she stretched out a trembling hand.

"You here?" she whispered. "Come. He's alive."

They hurried out of the yard, Julia, now that her mission was over, walking so fast that Nancy could hardly keep step with her, and so fell into a longer stride. Back again at the

wall, the old woman stopped and struck her hands together. "My God! my God!" she said quietly, raising her face to heaven, "what makes You let such things be?"

They went swiftly back through the woods, so unerringly avoiding stumps and stones that Nancy again felt as if they were both seeing in the dark. Once they took a short cut through a patch of woodland, where the trees brushed their faces and phosphorescent fires gleamed from the dead stumps below. The girl was strung to a pitch forbidding fear. She expected anything of this amazing night. Out of that black nest of shadow they reached the crisp upland, and then Julia paused, breathing hard.

"You said you would n't tell?" she asked.

"I shan't tell."

"I'll give you the reason" —

"I don't want any reason."

"Yes; it'll show you how folks live, and how you're making your life to-day and don't know it. When I was young I was going to marry him" —

"Judge Hill?"

"Yes. He was only Stuart Hill then. I left him because my brother went crazy after religion, and I'd got to take care of him. And I've been crazy myself ever since. If I had n't

left him, I might be in that room to-night, wetting his lips for him when he wakes up." A broken cry escaped her, and she gave way to dry and rending sobs. Nancy put out her hands, but Julia pushed them back and drew up her little figure with an old resolve. "There!" said she, "let's get home. It's all over and done with."

Once out in the road again, she asked, in her old tone of gracious courtesy, "You worried about that baby? You want to go up and see if it's asleep?"

"If you'd stay here, I might run up and listen."

Julia sank on a stone, relieved at solitude, and Nancy hurried up the hill. As she approached the little house, some sound too slight to be regarded, and almost like a prescience in the air, made her guess at the nearness of human things. She walked carefully, and her breath came quick. She wished herself below, but pride upheld her. Then she stepped beyond the lilac bush and came upon two figures. Involuntarily she put her hand on her heart, but the gigantic bulk of one reassured her. "Joan!" she breathed.

"Glory be to God — Nancy! I thought it was a pixie!" said Joan, crossing herself. "Is the town at your back?"

"I came up to see if the baby was all right," said Nancy, with dignity, forced so to account for herself. "I thought maybe he'd forget to feed her again. You can see to it now."

She walked away without a glance at the other woman, but Alla Mixon had not mistaken her; and when, a few minutes later, she and Joan went down the hill, alike disappointed in their quest, her look was keen upon the road before her to see whether Nancy was alone.

"I shouldn't thought Nancy would have gone up there, should you?" she asked Big Joan, who answered dryly:—

"Maybe folks would n't have thought it of you an' me; but you can't tell by the looks of a toad"—

"Oh, I know all that!" said Alla impatiently, "but you went because it's old Mis' Horner's grandchild, and I went because I happened along."

"The devil's will is some folks' happenin'," muttered Big Joan.

"What?"

"I said it's all one. Here's your gate. I'll say good-night."

"Did you see anybody with Nancy?" persisted Alla, her hand on the latch.

"I did n't. No more did I see Nancy. I

could n't see my hand before my face. Good-night to ye."

She went on with her lumbering stride, and Alla paused a moment to pat the stray rings of hair about her face, for she saw Martin Jeffries reading by the table. This was his house, and here she was living while she settled the business of her father's estate. Many said that if old Mrs. Jeffries would keep her, it would be a long day before she went back to the mills at Severn; and if Martin once took note of her, she would not go back at all. She rubbed her cheeks with a passionate hand, and drew a score of breaths to redden them; then she stepped into the low-ceiled room.

"'Evening, Martin," she called.

He looked up and nodded at her, not uncivilly, though he did not smile. Yet Alla made a pretty vision. She was short and rounded, with a dainty waist. Her face had a gypsy swarthiness, and her black hair grew in a peak on her forehead. She had an inadvertent sort of dimple in one cheek, and alluring, if not altogether natural, ways of tossing her head. Only her dark eyes were not to a maid's advantage; they were too shallow, and sometimes unpleasant lights were gleaming in them. She stood still a moment, and then came to the table

and leaned over Martin's shoulder, close without touching him. "What you reading?" she asked.

"History."

Alla was ostensibly scanning the page, yet her eyes were fixed upon the softness of his hair. "It looks real interesting," she said, her voice grown tremulous. "I never 've read any history."

"Take this, if you like," said Martin, closing the book and pushing back his chair. "I'm going to bed."

A tiny frown disfigured her forehead, and more color came, hard and bright. She stepped back a pace, and began taking off her hat. "Your mother gone upstairs?" she asked, with an aim at carelessness.

"Yes, half an hour ago. I'll leave the light. You can put it out."

He had taken his little kitchen lamp and reached the stairs, when some reaction from his coolness stung her to revenge.

"I saw Nancy Eliot to-night," she said hotly, with a woman's rashness bartering present satisfaction for an after pain. He was opening the door. "I went up with Big Joan to find out about that baby Luke Evans stole, and Nancy was just coming away from the house. Heard

anything about whether Luke's asked her up there for good?"

An almost imperceptible twinge moved the corners of his mouth, but he answered quietly, "No, I ain't heard," and went upstairs without another look.

She stood listening to his steps, first upon the stairs and then in his little room. When they ceased, she burst into a passion of crying, so abandoned that it almost seemed as if she invited it in scorn of her useless beauty; and while the tears were wet upon her cheeks, she took the lamp and went to the mirror with it, holding it high above her head. As she looked, her mouth settled into curves of grieving, and her eyes took on the pathos of self-pity. Presently a little hopeful gleam spread, like sunlight, from brow to lips. She could not conceive how one so pretty should ever despair. He was not married yet; if Nancy could be delayed a little on her victorious track, he would have to wait, as he had been waiting all these years. She smiled into her own eyes, and promised them to dare her utmost. Then, putting aside larger questions, she settled her neck ribbon and reflected that Nancy was very pale of late; besides, Nancy had no gold watch and chain.

III

NEXT morning Mrs. Eliot ironed, while Aunt Lindy and Julia, with low-toned garnishings of talk, assorted rags for braiding. Nancy changed her dress for one of her school cambrics, and made ready for a desired mission. Ever since opening her sleepy eyes, she had been moved, not by a sense of her own importance, but the importance of life as it touched her; and so, absorbed in piecing together her bits of bright ambition, she failed to notice how worn her mother looked under the burden of last night's confidence. To Nancy, her own decision made a completed fact, serenely regnant. She had begun inheriting the earth before her feet were even worn in its borders. Now, as she stood in her little bare room before the hazy mirror with the eagle atop, she crowned her head with braids of shining hair, and mused exaltedly. She had worked very hard, all the years of her girlhood, and success lay before her without a flaw. It seemed to her that she should always succeed, and that whosoever failed had not striven val-

iantly. Her toilet made, she unlocked the little blue chest containing her few treasures, and took from it a roll of money. She counted the bills with a serious absorption, although they had often been counted before, and then pinned them into her pocket. Running lightly down the stairs, she paused a moment at the ironing-table to whisper, "Where s'pose I'm going?"

Susan shook her head. Inwardly she was afraid Nancy meant to climb the mountain again, in defiance of village rules.

"Over to Alla Mixon's to make the last payment. I'll bring home the note, and let you tear it up."

Her joy was contagious, especially to one a-quiver with maternal love. The tears came into Susan's eyes. "You're a good girl," she said neutrally, and Nancy, laughing, rustled out of the door and along the road.

Susan set down her iron, and went to the window for one more look. At the moment, she took comfort in ignoring Nancy's incredible project of a wandering life. It was a nightmare fled with the coming of dawn; and now the sun had mounted and bluebirds were about.

Yet Nancy was not used to flights of unconsidered fancy; whatever she had set her mind upon was always ultimately hers. Forced to

remember that, Susan sighed again and took up her cooling iron.

As Nancy walked along, her thoughts hung joyously upon a duty done, a stage of life completed. She went back to the day, eight years before, when her mother had explained their poverty under the debt her husband left unpaid.

Tom Eliot was more willful than his daughter even, willful and unstable, too. He built castles, and when they tumbled, set about designing more. One of his pet dreams had been a stock-farm ; therefore he borrowed six hundred dollars of old Mixon to "launch out." Nothing came of it ; indeed, King's End always said the money went into another kind of stocks, and failed to emerge. Eliot died, and his wife, sinking into the apathy of the humble who are acquainted with grief, told Nancy they must sell a piece of land and pay their debt. Their land ? The land she had played over, and where she meant some time to see her own corn waving and her celery in rows for market ? For then Nancy meant to be a gardener. She took the matter into thrifty hands, and after her first term of teaching, went to old Mixon with a new note in her own name, and made him a payment on it. He was pleased with her pluck ; he thought of his one girl, softer of sinew than Nancy, but just as likely to

fight the world alone some day, and told her to "Go ahead!" She might assume the debt if she chose; her father's name was free.

In the dark stretch of road by the old watering-trough she met Martin Jeffries, heralding his approach by a florid and exultant whistle.

"I always tune up when I see you coming," he remarked, showing his white teeth. "What a fool I am!"

"Why are you a fool — for that?"

"Oh, then you know I'm 'round and have time to put on your stand-off look. Shake hands."

Nancy was holding her skirts, guarding them primly from the damp.

"I saw you only yesterday," she said, not offering to accept that winsome invitation.

"Well, and you'll see me to-morrow and Thursday, if I have my way about it. Confound it, Nancy, some day you'll drive me too far! You'll find yourself kissed before you know it."

He stood before her, hands in his pockets, and hat pushed back. She knew, without glancing at him, exactly how he looked, flushed, half angry. She turned from the narrow path he barred to a pool of water in the hollowed road, and thought fastidiously of her boots. But underneath her maiden daintiness some

trembling fascination kept her there because she liked to stay.

"Sometimes I wonder I'm so patient with you," he went on roughly, with little tolerance in his tone. "When I wake up in the night and think about you, I wonder if I ain't a sheep to let you treat me so; and then it's daylight, and I meet you all cool and calm and starched up and—good God!" He took off his hat, and passed an impatient hand over his forehead.

As for Nancy, she felt herself stiffening. "I wish you would n't say ain't!" she remarked perversely.

He broke into a great, mellow guffaw of laughter. That happy god stroked the lines of emotion from his face and creased it into sweetness. He laughed like Pan in some wood hollow, come upon sporting nymphs or grotesque animal.

"Oh, Lord, Nancy!" he cried, when the gusts were stilling. "Ain't it a funny world? Here's you and me—and it's spring—and you wish I would n't say ain't!"

"I don't see what there is to laugh about," said Nancy. "I'm going along now."

He did not move. "Where you going, dear?" he asked persuasively. The endearment forbade her answering, but she did want so to tell.

“Down to your house, to see Alla Mixon and make my last payment on the note.” Her eyes lighted, and met his in frank challenge of an answering gleam. She was not disappointed.

“You’re a good girl, Nancy,” he said softly, and the repeated commendation, in her mother’s own words, softened her also.

“I’m glad it’s done,” she continued. “Now I shall feel as if I could go off with the Elder.”

“The deuce you will!” remarked her lover. “You mean, now it’s done you feel as if you could come and live in your new house, and send herbs to market. Say, Nancy, *’t is* your house, and you can have anybody live in it you like. But I guess you’d better take me!” His face was all overspread with a sunny good-humor, his voice coaxed like that of a child, his hand was seeking hers. Nancy, according to her custom, selected the statement easiest of answer.

“Send herbs to market! Is that all you think of still?”

“That’s my profession,” said Martin, with willful dignity. “It’s going to be yours, too. We’re partners.”

Her dormant pride in him took fire.

“Oh, I don’t wonder your mother’s out of patience with you!” she cried hotly. “Your

father the best doctor in the county, and you studying with him and going 'round among the sick, and then settling down to tramp the woods after herbs, and sell them for little or nothing ! To just throw yourself away like that — it 's awful ! ”

“ But I shan't tramp the woods when we are housekeeping,” said Martin encouragingly, though he watched her, with that quizzical imp lurking at the corner of his mouth. “ I 'm going to have acres of sage and marjoram behind the house, and beds of lavender. It 'll be sweeter than

‘ The Lord into his garden comes.’

Sakes, Nancy ! when I think of them beds, I could roll in 'em like a cat.”

His malformed pronoun was too much for her, and she considered how deep the puddle might be at the edge. Martin had a wondrous cleverness in diagnosing her patience and guessing when to retire. He stepped aside and took off his hat punctiliously, not forgetting his key-note : —

“ Good-by, Nancy. Shake hands.”

She walked past him and, never once looking back, rounded the turn in the road. Martin took up his cheerful whistle, and went on to the

new house where the carpenters were hammering, in hollow cadence. Eph Cummings met him in the drive.

"Be'n waitin' for ye over an hour 'n' a half," he said, with some reproach.

"Anything particular?" inquired Martin.

"No; thought sure I'd find ye."

"Come along back then."

"No, our folks want to be harnessed up. Say, Martin, what's to pay in this town 't we can't let folks hoe their own row? There's Luke Evans, now; anybody'd think there wa'n't a trait in his character. Why can't a good honest girl go up there an' give him a lift 'thout bein' hauled over the coals? Not that I'd want her to if she's a girl o' mine. But what's the harm? Still, I'd speak to her, folks up in arms so. I certain would speak to her."

He nodded, pleased with his own diplomacy. Then he passed on. Martin, more slowly, followed the driveway to the house; but he whistled no more that day.

Nancy came to "the Jeffries'," and walked up the path between sunny earth beds where but few blossoms were yet awake, though a hundred sweets lay there in warm expectancy. This garden was the one neutral ground where Martin and his mother met harmoniously. They

shared a kindred instinct, a kindred wisdom devoted to the fostering of seeds and roots. They could make things grow. Green leaves rioted for them, and the neighbors, never quite used to it after many years, looked on sometimes with a jealous eye. Certain springs, when daffodils were blighting, Mrs. Jeffries' grass was all cockaded with them. When other folks were planting lilies and heart's-ease, she was thinning hers and throwing them into the road. Yet she and Martin, with the arrogance of genius, regarded their holding lightly. It was easy enough to make things grow, said they. Set them out and — there you were.

Nancy to-day had but a glance in passing for these old friends who had given her merry whiffs. She knew them all, even in their guise of budding green. There was the hollyhock walk and there the dahlia corner. There was larkspur, from which Martin, when they were boy and girl, had fetched an azure plumelet for her hat. Here was dielytra (skeleton ladies lived inside the blossoms), poppies promising the seed vessels that are tea-sets, ribbon grass, indispensable for trimming mullein hats, and peonies whose silken petals would be useful, by and by, for snapping on your fist. All this wealth was in futurity but the practiced eye was ready,

the mind discerned it. Columbine, foxglove, mourning-bride, — the very names carried their own enchantment.

Yet though Nancy looked their way, it was but absently. Her thoughts were busy over that inner world of her own desires. She paused a moment at the door, to calm her breath, and then went in.

Mrs. Jeffries swept the hearth, and Alla sat by the window, crocheting an intricate edge. This tolerated guest was never allowed to help about the house. Day by day she offered services, and then lingered about, in discomfited ease, while her hostess toiled silently, like an ant under heavy burdens. Martin's mother was a very little woman indeed, somewhat girlish in her glance and the way she carried her head. Yet though many might have found her appealing, it was not by her consent. A steel rod of a woman, she fashioned her own opinions and bore them trenchantly aloft. One person she had loved with an exceeding passion, — her husband, the doctor. Whether she prized Martin very much, it would have been difficult to say. She treated him with untired disparagement, from an alleged background of blame because he would not follow his father's calling. The neighbors had a theory that she despised him,

but Martin kept his own counsel. When Nancy went in, Mrs. Jeffries only gave her a nod, and went on sweeping. She was very deaf, and never attempted to hear without her trumpet, a fickle aid, to be laid aside when it so pleased her. Nancy walked up to Alla, and greeted her with a warmth due all to her errand and not to old acquaintanceship.

"Good-morning, Alla. I've come to make my payment. You know I said I would. I told you Sunday."

Alla glanced up, and then took a few more careful stitches, counting unnecessarily for a pause. But she spoke sweetly in her turn.

"Good-morning. The note? Yes, it's right where I can put my hand on it. You sure you want to do it to-day?"

"Oh yes; of course I do! I'm so pleased I can't wait."

Alla dropped her work in a careful little coil and went upstairs. She walked slowly, thinking. It was a great day for her too. When she came back, Nancy had unpinned the money from her pocket, and sat holding it, aware of its preciousness.

"How much you going to pay?" asked Alla carelessly, though with a heightened color.

"Twenty dollars. I guess there are some odd cents."

"Then I'll indorse it. That's the way father used to do with his notes."

"All the payments are there," said Nancy. "He wrote 'em every one down. This is the last, you know."

Alla turned the paper over and gazed elaborately at the back. "There ain't anything written here," she said. She looked up at Nancy and then again at the paper.

"Oh yes," pursued Nancy, smiling. "Let me see." She bent over it with knitted brows. It was her own handwriting, the note she had made out in her careful script and taken to old Mixon, asking him to receive it in place of the one against her father. She pulled it away from Alla's unsteady fingers, and turned it over. The back was blank. A pang of bewilderment pierced her to the heart.

"Why!" she cried wildly. Her knees were weak. She looked imploringly at the other girl. "Why, you know I'd 'most paid it up! You knew all along!"

"I did n't know a word," answered Alla steadily. "Father never talked business with me."

"But you knew it!" In the face of all her wasted effort, it seemed to Nancy as if everybody must have known. "I used to go up and make payments."

"I never was there."

It was true. Nancy remembered that. She turned the note over and over in her hands. It was hers ; yet it lied to her. She felt a wild dismay.

"You let me have it," she whispered. "Let me take it home where I can sit down and think it over."

But Alla drew it away from her, stepping back a pace. "No, I should n't dream of such a thing," she answered, with the firmness of one entirely in the right. "Father always kept his business in his own hands. He'd want I should." She seated herself again at the window, and took up her work.

Nancy put her hands upon the back of a chair and stood there droopingly. Mrs. Jeffries stepped about the hearth, getting ready for ironing, now and then glancing at the two as they moved or spoke. With the abnormal acuteness of those in whom sensibility comes to the aid of some defective sense, she felt the stir in the air ; but it was a part of her chosen attitude to despise curiosity among other human failings. Once, in passing a nail by the door, she knocked down an old cap of Martin's, and then dusted it with what seemed a lingering tenderness. Alla saw her, and an old

jealousy pierced her anew. She looked up at Nancy and spoke coldly : —

“Well, you want to make your payment ? If it ain't the last, it 'll be the first.”

Nancy had put the bills in her pocket and stood there, holding her hand upon them. She bent over and pinned the pocket together again. Tears blinded her and her lips were quivering.

“No, I guess I 'll wait,” she said brokenly, and, without a look at either of the women, went slowly out of the room.

Mrs. Jeffries spread her ironing-sheet, and remarked emphatically to Alla, “She's a good girl.”

“You don't seem to think so when you talk to him,” returned Alla savagely. “I've heard you tell him to stop running after her and making himself a laughing-stock.” She glanced about for the trumpet to convey that statement, subtly tempered ; but Mrs. Jeffries shook her head.

“She's a good girl,” she said again. “There ain't many like her.” Then she returned to the solitude of her infirmity.

Nancy walked weakly along the country road. All its beauties had grown dark to her. There is a curious and dreadful irony in the fact that money, in its departure, assumes the

guise of an almost limitless power. So long has it stood for greater things that, when it flees us, we feel, for the instant, as if the greater things went also. To commit suicide because you are a beggar seems to the vagabond on moorland and blue water a witless thing to do; yet the insanity of loss burns bloom alike with stubble. Nancy knew now the mind of financiers engulfed in ruin. Her brain was numbed; she looked blankly at the path before her. Presently, when she could think, she would lament, like others, that her loss was not that of money alone: it represented higher things, the gods to which her days were dedicated. Only that morning her life had dovetailed together so prettily. She was to leave the farm free of debt, and go herself to preach the gospel. In lifting that incubus of the unpaid loan, she had cherished an ingenuous certainty that the duties incident to birth and blood were done. Henceforth her course lay in holier altitudes. Yet those were fancies of an hour ago. As she walked on, her eyes dry now, but still unseeing, a shrill summons came from the Horner window. Old Sally's bed stood that morning where her bitter glance could rake the road.

"Nancy!" she repeated. "You come in here."

Nancy obeyed mechanically, straightening herself and setting her face lest drooping banners betray her. Mrs. Horner's room wore its own exquisite order; the bed was unwrinkled, a mould not made for agitation. Her cap and white gown were smooth and spotless; her eyes burned like jewels from under frilled borders. The thump of Big Joan's iron came from the kitchen.

"What is it, Mrs. Horner?" asked Nancy, hesitating in the doorway. "Did you want me?"

"You come in," commanded Sally Horner. "Take that chair. No, no, that one: I want to git the light on ye. What'd you go up to Luke Evans's for, yisterday artemnoon?"

Big Joan appeared from the kitchen; her great bulk filled the doorway.

"I did n't go up," said Nancy vacantly. All yesterday seemed very far away. "I was going by. The baby cried, and I went in."

"Cried!" echoed the old woman sharply. "Where was it? What was he doin' to it? What made it cry?"

"What made the woman eat the apple?" inquired Big Joan aside. "Natur' an' God A'mighty. Babies cryin'! 'T wa'n't a miracle when she cried down here."

"What was he doin' to it?" persisted the old woman. "You tell me all you see."

"I did n't see anything particular. He had n't fed it, and I helped him. He seemed to be much obliged. I'll be going now, Mrs. Horner. I don't know anything more about the baby. I don't really."

The old woman reached out and laid a clutching hand upon her dress. "Look here, you!" she said, in a fiercely beguiling whisper; "you go up there, an' when he's out o' the room ketch up that baby an' run. You bring it here to me, an' I'll keep the doors locked. You do it, an' I'll give ye 'most anything I've got."

"I can't do it, Mrs. Horner," said Nancy, trying to pass. "It is n't my business: mother says so."

Mrs. Horner fell back among her pillows, crying and beating the counterpane with her hands. "It ain't anybody's business," she moaned. "*He's* gone out plantin', an' Joan here tells me to my face she won't interfere, an' I've sent over 'n' over to the selec'men, an' they don't come. Oh, if I was a man, an' had two good legs an' a back!" She lay there glowering, and Big Joan systematically smoothed the sheet.

Nancy made her escape, and hurried home,

afraid of more challenges from alien affairs. At the door, her mother was waiting for her, smiling in justified anticipation. But Nancy could only look wanly in reply, and push past her up the stairs. "I've got a headache, mother," she said, with the old-time evasion of womankind.

Nancy was hardly out of the Horner yard when another visitor entered it: the Elder, in his voluntary shepherding about the neighborhood. When he stepped in at the door, Joan had gone back to her ironing, and Mrs. Horner, with no onlooker to be moved, had put her passion aside and lay panting, with the marks of tears upon her cheeks. The Elder stopped on the threshold, and her eyes met his in a fiery volley.

"Woman," he said, not with authority but an appealing kindliness, "arise and walk!"

Mrs. Horner gave an inarticulate snort, full of rage and wretchedness. "Don't you call me woman!" she retorted. "I've told ye that afore."

But the Elder was not discomfited. He looked at her patiently.

"They are not my words," he said. "They were uttered by a greater than I."

"Well, then, once is enough," returned Mrs. Horner, with one half-terrified glance at the

Bible upon the stand. She meant to make up to it in some moment of unoccupied solitude; meantime she dared her utmost. "Nobody need to come in here an' act out Scriptur' times, while my back's achin' an' my legs are numb. If you want to do anything besides cackle, you better go up an' see that God-forsaken Luke Evans an' tell him to bring back our baby. Come, now, you go! you go!" She was almost cooing at him.

The Elder, although no practical man as concerned his mortal body, awoke to energy over spiritual issues. "I will go there," he said. "I will carry the message." And before she could add more unto it, he was gone.

So it happened that Luke, frowning over his work of hammering together a baby's wagon in the shed, while the baby occupied a clothes-basket at his side, looked from the shadow falling before him and saw the Elder in the doorway. Elder Kent was smiling at him, a smile of chosen comradeship. It was an illumining without admixture of mirth, the overflow from a heart in a perpetual attitude of benediction.

"Mrs. Horner wants the child," he said, with no preamble.

"Well, she won't get her," remarked Luke, trueing a wheel.

The Elder sat down on the chopping-block, and bent forward to put one slender finger on the baby's cheek. It was always amazing to him, in his isolated life, to see anything so small and sweet.

"Are you a Christian?" he asked incidentally.

"No, I ain't. Nor a Mormon. Nor an idolater. Nor I don't believe there's any God."

"Don't you?" asked the other, with a sympathy quite unstudied. "That's too bad."

Luke looked up at him under brows suspiciously bent. He smelled a rhetorical trap, but the Elder was looking him in the face serenely. That sweet tranquillity but spurred the doubter on.

"You say you believe in God," he said scornfully, between hammerings. "You don't — or else you ain't used your brains. If there was a God, an' He was good, would He let things happen — the things that do?"

"No," said the Elder simply, "if the things were evil. But there is no evil. No blot on creation, not one." He looked adoringly out where the spring trees were shimmering and apple blooms burst warmly into pink. The moment seemed to him divine: an amazing answer to months of travail wherein he had inter-

rogated the stars, the growing grass, even the wonders of frost and snow. He had fought his way alone to a desert spring; and here, by fine according miracle, was one who also thirsted, and for whom the draught was meant.

Luke laughed scornfully.

"What should you say if you never 'd had a chance to learn anything?" he asked, with the accusing passion of Ishmael. "If the boys hooted at you — little devils! — when you went to school because you belonged to Old Larrups up on the mountain? What should you say when you see him kick your mother, an' you too little to kill him? God!" The word was a curse.

"Yet," said the Elder, with authority, "all those things were not evil; they were good."

"Oh, were they? You can tell that to the marines. You an' me have talked enough."

"I know they were good," said the old man, with a lingering passion of his own, "because I have had a long life, and I can see now that evil is one of the ways of God. If the bad man is bad, it is because he is ignorant of the road. He is taking a long, long path, when it might be shortened. But all the roads lead home."

Something, perhaps only the presence of a blameless age, subdued the scoffer. He had

slight respect for words ; but he was not deaf to honesty.

"That may be," he remarked grimly, "but if I meet Old Larrups, it won't hender my makin' short work of him, in hell or anywheres else."

"That may be your appointed task," said the Elder, with cheerfulness. "He and you may have to take the long road together. I don't understand evil. It is a mystery to me ; but God has told me I need not understand."

"Where'd you get your news ?" asked Luke, struggling against some natural deference for years and their fruitage.

There were no professional barriers about the Elder. He recognized his kinship with souls, whether or not they walked his way, and answered questions quite simply and directly.

"I am old, you know," he repeated. "I've been all my life thinking and praying, chiefly over sin. I've been all my life doubting God because He allowed sin to be — and pain. And suddenly it was borne in on me that He is good, and the world is good, and wrong is only goodness we don't understand ; I can't tell you, man, I can't tell you ! But I know." Tears sprang into his eyes, tears of hopeless longing for an expression ever beyond him. What words had he for the great nature pæans he heard in the darkness ?

Luke glanced at him curiously, and stayed his hand from work.

"Well, I guess you believe it all right," he said roughly. "If I did, I should have precious little to worry about."

The Elder's face lighted magically from within.

"Ah, that's it," he said. "You've got it. You are a part of His creation, a part of Him. You are not outside. You can't be afraid any more than that bird would be, if a limb broke under him." He had never heard the poet's great quatrain; the bird itself had taught him.

Luke turned back to his hammering.

"Want to send any word about the baby?" asked Elder Kent, rising.

"No, I don't."

"If you've begun to set by her" —

"Oh, drop it!" said the outcast scornfully. "I took her to pay off old scores, an' I'm keepin' her to show I'm a hog. That's all there is about it." The Elder broke a horse-radish leaf and set it upright in the basket, cutting off a sunbeam from the baby's chin. "I'll drag the basket over here," said Luke; but the silent service touched him.

Elder Kent went abstractedly away, and Luke pulled the basket out of the sun, and then stood

over it, musing. His black brows were bent. He had scant understanding of himself and his feeling for the little creature when he was alone with it. So far the child had been a wonder of goodness, and there was no difficulty in keeping its running-gear in order. Big Joan, unknown to her mistress, had come up that morning with a bundle of its clothes, and given him counsel. Joan adored the baby, but her sympathies were with him. Something in the crude valor of fighting for one's blood appealed to her ; but she was loyal to the household, and never spoke her partisanship. Now, faced by the awful prospect of bathing the child and putting fresh clothes on her, Luke had his first moment of real horror over what he had done. He stood appalled before a vista of years — two, three — when that helpless body would need a nurture he abhorred. He wished he had taken his revenge another way. The thought of Nancy returned upon him sweetly, and made him warm from head to foot : the gracious vision of her, when, half shrinking from her share in the great maternity of the world, she held the child against her breast and challenged his designs. He longed for her with an exceeding longing which seemed to him the outgrowth of his needs, and so no treason against the dead woman, to whom he held himself

bound with an abiding loyalty. It was a part of his obstinacy to prove a faithful husband because his flouters called him no husband at all. The vision of Milly also arose and waited dispassionately to be compared with the living girl, — the dead one who had believed implicitly whatever he told her, and yet who failed him when the test of courage came. Nancy seemed to him all soul, yet with an altogether beguiling presence. He whispered her name, and, calling "Come!" looked down the silent road in search of her.

But Nancy was lying straight on her bed, overthrown by the morning's duel. All through the last years she had strained forward on a flying track; now she had fallen. Her mother came to her with tea, and she could not drink it; for days she lay there silent, swallowing something when faintness forced her. Then, because the walls of the room had grown so hateful, she dressed and crawled downstairs. The Elder had gone prospecting for souls, and Miss Julia sat in the kitchen, pale as Nancy herself, yet clad in the invisible armor of endurance. Susan clucked about with a loving solicitude and made blanc-mange for dinner.

"Judge Hill is failin'," she said cheerfully at the table, sharing her tidings from the world without.

A flicker of interest passed over the girl's face. She looked up at Julia. But the old woman lifted her cup with a steady hand and drank her tea, strong as it could be poured. Nancy knew that was in preparation for the night. When dinner was over, she followed Julia out of doors, where she had gone to take in the clothes. Alive now to the misery of the world, Nancy felt a passionate pity for her.

"I'll go over there with you to-night, if you want I should," she said in an undertone.

Julia took a clothes-pin from her mouth to answer coldly, —

"Where?"

"The Cumnor Road."

"You need n't. I've been alone: every night."

"But I want to. Oh, please let me!"

Julia looked at her kindly, with a little conventional smile. Nancy understood, in a dim fashion, that she was holding herself in check. If she seemed hard, it was because the world voices sounded very hollow and far off, while her own woe cried so near.

"I only meant you need n't," she answered. "I'd like to have you. But it would n't be wise for you, now you're under the weather."

"I'd like to," urged Nancy again. "It'll do

me good to think about something else." No sooner had she sorrow of her own than she tried to find out other woes that might be slaked. A blow had fallen on her. It seemed a judgment ; and she looked about within herself for the sin it was meant to castigate. Oh, poor pathos of humanity ! we feel a wound and then search for the god who watched our blundering way and bludgeoned us for ills we innocently did. So Nancy, not knowing in what fashion her own web could be unraveled, looked piteously up to heaven and began doing sacrifice. And because her mother told her how Luke walked to the smithy with his gun over his shoulder and the baby in its little cart, and how old Mrs. Horner cried out upon the village to the effect that the child might never have had a bath, she slipped out unperceived, that afternoon, and climbed the mountain. Here again she might find an altar.

The Evans kitchen was in prime order. Luke himself, surprisingly well-shaven, stood in the doorway, his eyes upon the road. Only the baby had not shared in the general amelioration. She was whimpering as if now she knew the recipe by heart.

" Oh," cried Luke fervently, " I knew you 'd come ! "

Nancy looked upon him in some surprise. Small tokens of gallantry had no significance for her, unused to the vagaries of the preening male. Martin Jeffries was not wont to woo her softly, and so long had she been considered his property that other young men had only desired her from afar. "How's the baby?" she asked. "Do you give her a bath?"

"Oh yes, she's real clean," returned Luke, smiling in what she thought a vacuous fashion. It only made him look shiftless, and she concluded the bath could not be thorough.

"Did you give her one to-day?"

"No."

"Then I will. Can you heat up the water?"

He tucked some kindlings in the stove. His motions had a glorified alacrity.

"Nancy," he ventured, when there was a crackling under the cover, "you know the books you spoke of, — the ones you did n't like?" He pointed to the shelf where rested his former pride and glory, the unread volumes of revolt. Nancy's eyes followed. "I've covered 'em up," he continued shyly. "I nailed a piece o' calico across the shelf. You look. You can't see 'em."

"I should n't want to see them," said Nancy

virtuously. "You'd better have burned them up."

His face fell. The books stood for years of pride in a splendid unbelief. They were his unused weapons; they helped him face the social order unabashed.

"I guess I could n't do that," he said humbly. He looked at her, his seeking heart in his eyes. Already the memory of Milly was one of the "old, far-off, forgotten things" of another life. Nancy met his glance, and felt annoyed. This was the look which, from Martin, held her even while she longed to flee.

"I don't see how you're ever going to take care of this baby," she said, with the assurance of a district visitor. "You'll have her sick before you know it; mother says so. You ought not to leave her alone."

"I don't."

"Well, how much good does it do her to be hauled 'round in a cart and lie in the shade while you shoe horses? It's a shame. You ought to have a woman here to see to her." She spoke innocently, without a mawkish thought.

Luke clenched his hands. "Oh, if I could!" he cried passionately. "I see now what I've missed. If I could have her—and marry her

—and know everybody knew she belonged to me — Oh, Nancy!” He turned sharply away. She felt there were tears in his eyes, and thought he was lamenting his lost love, neither maid nor wife. So, softened by trouble, her heart warmed to him.

“There! there!” she said gently. “The water’s boiling. Should you just as soon go out while I wash her? I don’t know how to do it very well.”

Luke went into the shed without a word and sat on the chopping-block, kicking his heels and listening to the voice of life. For life was calling him. The maiden was here. “Throw off the clogs of hate and circumstance,” whispered the unseen beguiler. “The spring has come. Love and be loved.” But all he thought was that the moments were going fast.

It took Nancy a long time to wash the baby. She began it tentatively, almost with distaste; but when a pink foot kicked against her breast, she suddenly imprisoned it in one hand and kissed it softly. She hardly knew what it made her think of, nor why her cheek was red.

“Where do you keep her clothes?” she called at last, and Luke, ecstatically silent, came in and opened the drawer. Then Nancy slipped on little garments, and the baby murmured at

her. She did not heed him now, watching her from the doorway. The sight seemed to him wonderful: the happier child and the beneficent vision, half angel and half mother.

"She ought to be fed, I guess," she suggested, smiling up at him. He had gained an apparent nearness never accorded Martin, because as yet he made no demands on her, and because he was in trouble.

"I can do that," he answered, also smiling. "I've learnt how. You see."

He warmed the milk, and the baby made anticipatory remarks. Then he fed her from an old coffee-pot with rags tied over the nozzle.

"Do you wash it out?" asked Nancy anxiously. "Everything's got to be clean."

When he laid the child back in the cradle, it was more content than he. But now, for him, there was some meaning in the summer world. He looked down at his hands, estimating their strength, and the veins in his forehead swelled with pride: for, he reflected, he could support a woman.

"Do you want to live in the country always?" he asked.

Nancy had risen and was pulling down the sleeves over her strong white arms. "I don't know," she said absently. Her mind was with her own lost argosies. "I should n't care."

Then it burst forth. "I ain't much to look at," cried the man, placing himself before her, "but I'd be good to you. I'd take care of you. Oh, Nancy, there's nobody like you!"

The meaning of it struck upon her like Apollo's hand on Daphne's chilling branches. "Is that what you mean?" she cried fiercely. "Oh, how can you?"

He shrank before her, not, she felt, because he recognized the justice of the lash, but from pain alone. Then her old partisanship of him as a downtrodden creature subdued her to some tolerance.

"When I came up here just to help you out," she said brokenly, "and Milly" — It was impossible to go on. She meant to say, in the country phrasing, "and Milly not cold in her grave;" but at the thought of the dead girl and herself in one relation to him, her virgin pride took fire. "You must n't ever speak so to me," she concluded firmly, and turned to go.

"Nancy, you'll come up again?"

She shook her head.

"Then I don't know what'll become of me." He spoke with a desperate denial not meant to be dramatic. She saw the old dogged look enthroned on his face, and confessed to herself that she did not know either. "After all," he

concluded obstinately, "is there any harm in a man's tellin' a girl he thinks more of her than all the world?"

"It is an insult from you," she cried hotly, "when you say you don't believe in any God and" — She could not go on, but he understood her. It cut him to the soul to think this chaste creature could suspect him of asking her to bear the gibes of an undiscerning people.

"I'd beg you to marry me;" he trembled; "yes, Nancy, on my bended knees." Why had he not begged the other woman? He did not know. The world swam before him: this great planet, ruled by a hampering law, and his own little orb of dark revolt. Only he knew she was beautiful to him with the beauty of the spirit, and he clung to her compassion.

Nancy went quietly past him, with a significant dignity. She paused on the threshold, and looked back. "I shan't come again unless I think I ought to, for the baby," she said. "I'll tell Big Joan to come. But, anyway, we must n't speak of this." She looked very stately and tall, stepping down the road, and Luke groaned aloud, remembering that other day when he had not offended her. Then, because ideal passion had not obscured the natural man, he cursed the god of circumstance for making

him what he was and so denying him his natural rights.

That afternoon Susan Eliot, worried out of her taciturnity, had stopped Martin Jeffries at her gate.

"Here!" she called to him. "Can you find out what's the matter with Nancy?"

He shook his head.

"You seen her lately?"

"No."

"She looks awfully. She has ever since that mornin' she went to your house to pay up. I'm plagued to death." Martin took off his hat, and ran a hand through his thick hair. "Ain't your mother said anything?" persisted Susan.

"No. Mother would n't know. Her head's in the sand."

Susan shaded her eyes and peered up the road. "Ain't that Nancy now?" she asked. "You go an' meet her. You find out. I'll run." She whisked into the house, and Martin went on. He was the son of her spirit; he knew that, and the thought, though he smiled over it, gave him some slight comfort when Nancy was cold. He met her in the way, and was shocked at her pallor and the droop of her frame.

"Don't go home, Nancy," said he. "Come for a little walk."

She looked up at him. He could see that there were dark circles under her eyes, and that all the hope had died out of them : all the self-confidence, too. Her old resistance of him had melted away. But that was the more alarming ; it seemed as if she had hardly life enough left to resist. "I can't," she said, still looking at him wanly. "I'm tired."

He turned about with her, and they walked silently in at the gate and up the path. At the door she stopped and said, "Good-by."

"No," said Martin, "let me come in a minute."

She led the way, with the same air of finding denial troublesome, and he followed her into the sitting-room where the afternoon sun lay in a pleasant dream. Nancy sank into the great rocking-chair, and, holding her hat in her lap, pushed her fingers wearily over her forehead. Martin drew a chair in front of her.

"What is it, Nancy?" he asked. "What's the matter?"

She tried to smile away the question, but, in spite of her, two tears gathered and coursed slowly down her cheeks. Then two more came, and all the hurrying flood. Martin waited, holding his hands hard upon his knees.

"I can't do this," she said, at last. "They'll be in."

He got up, and took her by the hand. "You come with me," he said quietly. "Come out to the swing, and get it over."

She rose, beset by the burden of her tears, and let him lead her out by the side door to the fragrant orchard. There, in a corner by the wall, was the old swing, kept from childhood's days. Martin himself had renewed the rope from time to time. Why, he never told; perhaps it was because he had seen grown-up Nancy there, drying her wet hair in sun and wind, and pushing the stones with a careless foot. But this time he took her to the flat rock where the wall gave a back, and there she sat down and wiped her eyes.

"Don't you tell mother," she besought him.

"No."

"You see, I went to make the last payment, and I found I had n't made any at all." She looked at him in hopeless acceptance of the incredible. Martin stared at her.

"Try to tell me," he said patiently. "You know you paid the rest. What makes you think you did n't?"

"They were n't written down."

"Did n't he write 'em down?"

"Oh yes! I saw him."

"And they were n't there?"

"No."

"Then the note was forged."

"Oh no! it was mine. It was my writing, — and my paper. You know you laughed at me for using my best paper, with the dove up in the corner. Aunt Lindy gave it to me that Christmas."

Martin was watching her keenly. He kept his eyes on hers, as if to steady her.

"When did I laugh at you?"

"That day in the schoolhouse."

"What day?"

"Why," said Nancy, with a touch of temper, "I'd just begun to teach, and you came in after school to get me to go to ride. It was your birthday, and I gave you my 'Pilgrim's Progress.' I was copying the note, and looked in the arithmetic to see if I had got the wording right; and that was why you laughed. You said, 'Let old Mixon make it out himself;' and I told you I wanted to be sure 't was right. And I used my new paper — with the dove."

"Ah!" breathed Martin. The day was coming back to him. He remembered other things about it, — things Nancy had never known. For that spring marked the end of their boy and girl companionship. He had ended it himself by telling her he was a man now, and full of

love; so he had frightened the bird from his hand. The "Pilgrim's Progress" had been the last thing she ever gave him, perhaps because she was afraid, in her fierce remoteness, of drawing him her way.

"Nancy," he said, "you give the whole thing up to me. I'll sift it."

"You can't. It'll make talk. And mother must n't know. It would kill her."

"No, it won't make talk either. I'll see to that. Poor little girl! poor Nancy! You go in and lay down. Stop thinking about it."

In the midst of her distress, she was drearily conscious of wishing he would say "lie" instead of "lay," though it seemed a smaller matter now. But Martin wished to be gone; she saw that. He was in such haste that she thought a little bitterly of his persistency in time of joy and his imperviousness to grief.

"Mind what I tell you," he called, striding across the orchard and over the gap. "Stop thinking, and go eat a good supper."

Then he went home as if, Mrs. Eliot thought, he was "sent for," and sat down opposite Alla in the sitting-room, talking to her about nothing at all until she flushed and happiness entered into her heart. His mother, getting supper, watched him suspiciously, but said no word.

IV

THAT night Nancy sat within the pasture boundary near the Cumnor Road, while Julia Kent went on her lonely quest. They had crossed the woods in silence, though two or three times Nancy thought she heard a footstep behind them and the snapping of a twig. But so far, she was unmoved ; distraught by greater issues, she could have challenged night to show a spectre blacker than life had conjured for her. Julia had bade her go no farther.

“If he’s dying,” she said, “I shall want to be alone. I’ll come back and tell you. Don’t wait more’n half an hour. No, I’ll come anyway.” So she glided into the night, and Nancy was left to brood over her hope’s betrayal and the questions that beset her now incessantly.

Must she begin the weary road over again, or, when Elder Kent should go, take up her cross and follow ? The Elder was settled now contentedly, spending his time on the mountain, or with Luke. He had periods of thus selecting some soul, and wooing it to seek out God ;

but he might, at any instant, resume his vagrant march. Should she go? What did God wish? Suddenly fear, unknown to her until this summer, returned upon her; she felt an alien presence in the dark. Yet only Julia appeared out of the shadow, and Nancy, relieved though trembling, put out a hand and then, ashamed, withdrew it. Julia came swiftly up to her.

"He's very low," she said sharply. "I've got to stay. I'll cross the pasture with you, first. I don't want to be back yet; the house is n't settled enough. They keep running out, one or another. I'll wait till the watchers come." She was drawing Nancy away homeward, but the girl resisted and whispered in her ear: —

"I think there's somebody 'round — in that clump. Don't you?"

Lurkers of the night were nothing to the fierce old woman, dominated by the smothered passion of her youth. She strode over to the grove of pine and underbrush, searched it, and came back unmoved.

"There's nobody there," she said. "You're nervous. You ought to be abed. Come." But the man lay wrapped in another shadow, not near enough to hear their speech, though near enough for watching.

Julia walked rapidly, and Nancy, from the poverty of her strength, had some ado to keep up with her. The old woman talked sharply, as if she challenged the night, and Nancy, wishing she would lower her voice, was ashamed to ask it. At last, when they were half across the pasture, and the man in the shadow far behind, Julia sank upon a rock and held her hands to her throat.

"I must rest," she said, "or God Almighty knows how I shall get through this night. Nancy, you mark me — you mark my words: the things that are natural are right. Folks must make way for 'em. Nobody made way for me, and so I went crazy. And I need n't have been. I could have been saved." The dry passion of her voice was terrible to hear. Nancy could not believe that this was the little creature who sat and sewed with farmers' wives, talking briskly of trifles. "See how it ended," she continued. "I thought I was doing what was sent me; and see how it ended!" She seemed to be scourging herself back to the past, as if there only could she feel at home. "He was sixteen — brother John — when it all begun. He'd always been different, and mother liked him best. And when he was sixteen, religion got hold of him, and he went into the

woods stark naked, all but the old buffalo robe, and told mother he was going to live there till the coming of the Lord. She cried and cried. She used to carry pies down to the swamp where he built him a hut, and he would n't touch 'em. I was a little girl then. I thought he was John Baptist, and I told mother 't was all right, for he 'd eat locusts and wild honey. I could laugh now; for I thought the locusts were blooms, and I wondered what he'd do when they were gone. I used to chew 'em myself, and it seemed wonderful they were so sweet; and when they did n't stay me, I thought it was because I was n't called. So it went on, and Stuart Hill came to me and brought me bunches of Provence roses — O my God! my God! how afraid I am of June till the roses are gone by! — and one day he kissed me and I kissed him back. Then mother was taken sick, and she made me promise, when she was dying, that wherever brother went I 'd go too, and I 'd tend him as she would. And she died; and I told Stuart Hill, and said good-by to him, and tramped the roads, while brother called upon sinners, and I cursed God in my heart!" She rocked back and forth, a writhing figure of the night.

"Why don't you go to the door and ask them

to let you in?" cried Nancy, her heart beating the same terrible measure. "Why don't you tell 'em you've got to be with him?"

The woman laughed a little bitter laugh.

"That's a part of it," she said. "I would if he wanted me; but he don't. Do you suppose he thinks of me as I am, with cracks in my cheeks and claws for hands? No; if he sees me now, as he lays there, it's with my hat on the back of my head and the curls a-streaming. My God! my God!"

Nancy clenched her own hands tight, for fear of imitating that motion of unbridled grief.

"And you heed it!" cried Julia fiercely; "you heed it. That's why I tell you. If a man loves you and wants you, you take him, and don't go raving off about altars and sacrifices. They make me sick. Do you think God set us here to strain ourselves after another world, and forget the one that's under our feet? Folderol!" She rose, and Nancy rose with her. All this time the shadowy man was halting in a deeper shade; now he slipped on behind.

"Did your brother know?" ventured Nancy.

The old woman laughed, a hopeless note over the dullness of humankind.

"He? no," she said, with a tender scorn of

him. "He don't know anything but God and Judgment. Yes, he does sometimes. I've seen him look right into folks and tell 'em what 's in their hearts. But not mine. I was too near to him. He never saw mine."

At the boundary wall she turned, leaving Nancy to go on alone. The girl was deeply stirred. She found it incredible, not that this ancient thing should have suffered the pangs of love, but that anguish, and not a mere dull memory, could still be kept alive. The sequel of the story repelled her, the fiery moral. Was the earth indeed to be regarded, as well as some chilly heaven? Must not the righteous spurn it with their feet? Yet it was not of her old lover she thought when her mind strayed thus to ties and hearthstones: it was the outcast up on the mountain who had not told her his desire, but his great want of her. Need she seek her sacrifice on the highway? It might lie rather in turning a scoffer to God and mothering his nameless child. So she went thoughtfully on, and when she was within her own gate the shadow of the man fled away unseen.

For many days Nancy dragged herself about like one who, in suffering misfortune, has sustained also some physical shock hostile to all the functions of life. It was like a blow on

the head : will and motion were paralyzed. So for a time she accepted her trouble slavishly, not knowing how to rise and face it. But one morning her eyes cleared, her heart beat stronger, and she began to question. Some one had juggled with her. Who? Not Alla : a shallow thing, too early bent on courtship and vain wishes, she was yet honest. Not old Mixon : rough as he might have seemed to alien eyes, he was a bit of New England, a lord of the soil, scorning to hold his word more lightly than his bond. While impossibilities balanced thus, her energy grew, and she took her hat and sped along the road to find Alla and say — she did not yet know what. But at least she had risen from her mental swoon. She could think. She could speak.

Alla was at the kitchen table, making spatterwork. It was a stolen moment while Mrs. Jeffries swept the floors above, mercifully removed from the temptation to make satirical remarks about young ones playing with ink. Martin sat by the window, behind the county paper. He looked as if he had settled there for the morning ; but Alla could not know that he had seen Nancy coming and hurried in to filch their talk. She was laboriously arranging a pattern of leaves.

"I think this 'll be real pretty for Christmas," she said; but before he could reply, Nancy was in the room. Her resolve, so strenuous, so ignorant of its own direction, had keyed her to an unwonted pitch.

"Look here, Alla," she began, "something has got to be done about that note."

Alla arranged a fern with a steady hand. "Well, I'm sure I don't know what to say," she answered sympathetically. "Nor I don't know as there's anything I can do. It's your writing. You told me it was yourself."

"It is my writing," owned Nancy fiercely, "but there's monkey about it. You let me see it again."

Alla carefully wiped her hands and took out her father's pocket-book. From the papers within she separated the mysterious note and held it forth; but when Nancy would have taken it, she kept it in a guarding hand. The two girls stood there, holding the bit of paper, the one subjugated again by her old distraction and bewilderment, the other flushed yet calm. Martin put down his paper and looked at them.

"What is it about a note?" he asked.

They started. Nancy hardly saw him, but Alla had not forgotten him for a moment. It

was she who answered, looking him in the face with distressful eyes : " Nancy thinks there's something queer about the note. I can't make anything of her."

" It is n't my note," said Nancy loudly. She flushed redly. His interrogating voice had stirred her ; she felt as if they were speaking before a judge. " Mr. Mixon wrote on my note — the other one — and the indorsements are not here."

" Well, here's the note, and that's all I know about it," said Alla despairingly. " Father'd have made a record. Would n't he ? " she asked of Martin humbly. " Would n't he ? "

" Sure. Let's see the note." Alla passed it to him without demur. She dared not tell him — either because he was a man, or because he was the man she loved — that it should not go out of her hands. He held it up to the light, with some vague memory that detective stories had much to say about water-marks. " You think it is n't the old note ? " he said to Nancy. " Is it like it ? "

" I know it is n't the old one," she answered, scornful of his irrelevance. " I know it."

He glanced up at Alla. " Let's see the old one and compare," he ventured carelessly.

She made an almost imperceptible move-

ment, and then steadied herself, looking at him with quickening eyes. Did he doubt her? Was he laying a trap?

"Why, this is all the note there is," she said patiently.

"Oh yes, of course! what a fool I am!" Again he held it to the light. There was a little brown stain on it, something like the impress of a leaf. "Well, I can't make anything of it." He gave it back, and resumed his paper.

Alla sighed quickly, a sigh of satisfaction. He could not care for Nancy, her heart said to her. But Nancy only thought he did not care for her cause; he had told her to leave it with him, and yet, see how he relinquished it! She would not look at the offending note again, nor talk of it while he was by.

"I'll bid you good-day," she said proudly, and walked out of the house, though not homeward. Her face was hot with anger, and to escape her mother's eyes, she took the descending road and hastened on, her mind a turmoil. If she had a thought, it was that her little schoolhouse lay that way. There, on the step, she might sit down and brood.

Later in the forenoon, Mrs. Jeffries fried doughnuts; and while she spurred up the fire, Martin stood by the table, gravely making

rounds into rings, with the aid of a pepper-box top. That act represented an old-time feud. She believed in the unembellished cake ; Martin swore to the orthodoxy of rings. He worked for dear life, and when she turned again, a new order reigned upon the board.

"My land alive!" she muttered to some unseen confidant, "I've as good a mind as ever I had to eat, to mould 'em up together an' begin all over."

Martin armed himself with the poker, and mounted guard. Mrs. Jeffries advanced, looking catacornered lest he catch the betraying twinkle in her eye. Martin was wise in his generation. He had not summered and wintered his mother these twenty odd years for nothing.

"I like 'em so," he shouted. "I like 'em — like 'em — so! so!" He danced up and down before her ; he knew she could not hear, but he knew also that her deafness gave her the most pleasing of ironical satisfactions. It was her weapon, unique, invincible. She pushed him aside, and gathering a handful of the doughy rings, laid them in to fry. Martin, with an ostentatious courtesy, put down the poker and picked up her trumpet from the sewing-table between the windows. He applied one end to her ear

and remarked into the other, "Mother, you're awful obstinate!"

"Don't yell so," said Mrs. Jeffries, delighted over the onslaught.

"If you were n't so obstinate, you'd be a real nice woman."

"Mercy! I should think I was deaf," she muttered, turning the doughnuts. "Obstinate! you better talk. There's worse than bein' obstinate. What do you do? You hang 'round after a girl that hates the sight of you till you're a laughin'-stock" —

"I ain't. Everybody admires me."

"An' then, without why or wherefore, you dance off with a little miserable fly-by-night" —

"She's upstairs," Martin breathed ominously to the trumpet, and presently became aware that the ear-piece was nowhere. She had stepped away and left it pointed — a favorite trick. He pursued her; she shook her head free of it and went on: —

"Takin' that poor miserable pint-o'-cider to ride! What do you s'pose folks thinks? What do you s'pose Nancy Eliot thought?"

"I shouldn't think you'd care what she thought," volleyed Martin, aiming to some brief purpose; but she gave no token of hearing.

"That's like a man. My soul, if it ain't!

Not like your father. He's the only one that ever stepped that was fit to have gover'ment."

"Did n't he ever like any girl but you?" essayed Martin, following her to the cupboard and back again. "Honest, now! When you sat in the seats, and he sung tenor?"

Mrs. Jeffries rolled and cut, interposing a shoulder to aural advances.

"I s'pose it was the greatest mistake I ever made to have her here" —

"She's upstairs," indicated Martin, in futile pantomime.

"But I knew there wa'n't nobody else that'd take the trouble, an' I thought she'd settle up the business an' go back to her fact'ry work. But law! not she! A horse and shay an' you all slicked up, an' bein' beaved over to Ryde, as budge as you please!"

"We went to see about a mortgage," groaned Martin. He was certain to get the worst of it. He always did, in this game of no thoroughfare. But he noted wickedly that his mother, in the abstraction of attack, was at least cutting the doughnuts into rings.

"If I don't give her a hint, Thanksgivin' time will see her under this roof. She'll be here when the snow flies. But I warn ye, if you're goin' to take her to live in that new house" —

He dropped the trumpet and fled, defeated. Alla's step was on the stairs; retreat was the only road to silence. He met her in the entry, and smiled upon her. She looked at him; then her eyes dropped. Alla had changed. While he was indifferent, she had courted him by subtle ways, not knowing, in the fierceness of disappointed hope, how far love led her. Now, of a sudden, he had become kind. He did not woo her, yet he sought her out; and some natural instinct withdrew her from him and covered her with a blushing pride. Hope was robust in her; at the first hint of his presence meant for her alone, she told herself that Nancy's cause was lost; her own might yet be won. The illusive veil of a woman's right to be wooed in ancient fashion flung over her such charm that Martin looked upon her amazed. He had never dreamed she was so pretty, so almost sweet.

"Going out?" he asked, seeing her hat and the little basket she carried.

"Yes down to Cold Spring. There's cress there. Your mother said she liked it." Once she would have bid for his company, but now she dared not.

Martin walked along by her side. "She won't touch it if you get it," said he. "She likes to go down herself and pull it up."

"Never mind. I guess I'll give it a try," she answered shyly, and he let down the bars for her into the field. She stepped through, not looking behind her, but hunger was keen at her heart. Would he put up the bars and turn away, or would he come? Presently he was at her side; and Nancy, walking home again, saw him, — Nancy, who had watched them driving off to Ryde the day before. A strange new pain beset her. Never had she seen Martin walking away from her with any girl; though, as she told herself, it hurt her now only because the girl was one of Alla's kind. But even that seemed a part of the muddiness of human affairs; and so she wandered back again into her blind alley of debate.

"Got your business 'most done?" asked Martin.

"Not quite," returned Alla. "It takes a good while." She saw no end to the vistaed delight of days under the same roof with him. Mrs. Jeffries had spoken the truth. It would be till "snow flies."

"You'd just as soon I'd ask about it?"

"Yes," she vowed, with fervency, "I guess I would."

"So Nancy didn't get all paid?"

Alla glanced up at him sharply; but he was

occupied with a sweet-apple twig, cut as they went along. It was a crotched stick, and he held it straight before him in outstretched hands.

"Nancy's queer," she said evasively. "I can't make anything out of her."

"Oh, well! she's worked pretty hard to pay up that debt. Sort of takes it out of her to get a set-back." The apple bough was obstinate. It would not turn. "Did you know you could find a spring with this, same as you can with witch-hazel?" he asked.

"Folks say so," said Alla, suave with admiration of anything he knew. "Seems terrible queer to me."

"It'll turn in your hands, and point straight down to the ground. Sometimes, if you hold it tight, it'll twist the bark to get there. 'T won't do it to-day. Bewitched, I guess." He tossed it into the grass. "What was that about Nancy Eliot? Oh, well! I would n't mention it if I were you. It sets folks to talking, and they take sides, and then where are you?"

Alla was in no danger of telling. Already she had tired of Nancy's troubles; fortune was turning her way, and she thought of nothing else. Once, yearning for love denied, she had told herself that if Nancy had to go to work and climb her hill of difficulty all over again, the

new house might stand untenanted, recording barren years. Now the wind had changed, and she wished the girl no harm, save what might work more miracles. They went on to the spring, and she filled her basket with cress, and made a hollow of her hands for him to drink. But he refused, though laughingly. He was afraid of polliwogs, he said ; had been ever since that time Eph Cummings thought he swallowed one and was sick a year. Alla drank prettily, and tried not to picture the touch of his lips upon her hand. He looked at her bending over the spring. How pretty she was ! Why had he never noticed it before ? She seemed soft and kindly too. Perhaps she was less of a flirt than he used to think ; for Martin, in knowing her lightness, had never guessed that she was for him more than for another.

Cold Spring lay in the lower pasture. " You don't mean to go home right off, do you ? " he asked. " Let 's climb to Old Maids' Lot."

She turned with him, the ready color suffusing her cheeks. The way led through a defined aisle with a cathedral arch above ; it was an old cart-path, used so rarely now that the grass had a chance for all its rich concealment. This was the bourgeoning time of the year. Life was at its full. Two little green-gray birds

swept back and forth, each with a shred in its beak, and neither daring the homeward way lest these human things should follow.

"Wait," said Martin softly ; "they're building. It's on that low branch. See!" He was thinking of the nest — perhaps of his new house, too — but Alla thought only of him. Her heart beat chokingly and hurt her ; a mist obscured her eyes.

"Cunning little things !" she said ; but she had not seen them.

"They think they're terrible smart. Look ! that one's darting in. See him lay the straw with his bill. Little gumps !" But he said it tenderly. The house-maker instinct was strong in him. He told himself, with an oath big enough to astound both girls who thought they knew him, that Thanksgiving time should see him at his own hearth, his mate by his side. Thinking that, he put out a hand to Alla in unconscious appeal, the prayer of man to woman ; she saw it too late, though not too late for sickening memory.

They climbed the gentle slope into the open, the clarified green of June filtering over them, a witchery hard to be withstood. The color magic sprang vividly, making a medium thicker than the air, and once Martin put up his hand

to brush it away. The June world got into his blood. He thought of his delight, withholding herself from him, and wondered at her dullness; for he never doubted that in her soul Nancy loved him. But all he said was, "Pretty?" And Alla gave a little responsive sound.

They touched the upper slope, and Martin breathed again. Now the spell was not too strong for him. He took off his hat, and passed a hand over his forehead. "It's hot," he said. "Good to strike a breeze."

There were the cellars of three ruined houses, side by side. The Cummings sisters had lived here, each in her own domain, civil but unfriending to one another and the world. Alla seated herself on a sunken doorstone, and Martin, at a distance, buried his face in the cool aloofness of the grass.

"See the cinnamon roses!" she called, — something thrilled her voice, though it seemed to be for the forsaken garden, — "and bouncing-bet. Do you suppose their beds run way out here?"

"Yes," answered Martin dreamily, "and they slipped out and tended 'em and never spoke."

"How'd you know? It was before our day."

"Anybody'd know. They came up here to

live because they all three fell in love with the same man, and he made up to each of 'em on the sly. So they hated him — and other folks — but they hated one another more."

"Why?"

"Oh, anybody 'd know! You can't blame the one you love, even if she plays you false. You have to blame somebody else."

"The one you love!" It sounded very sweet to her. The old life when she went back and forth to her work in the city, spent her money on cheap finery, and held a foolish commerce of looks and smiles, seemed to her vague and unlovely. A little more, and it would be quite forgotten. Once she had left her father in loneliness to have what she called life in the town, — but then Martin was not so straight and tall. The woody aisles in King's End looked to her now like Paradise. Yet old traditions were loud in her where nature had not muted them, and she sought for talk to hold him. "There's ladies'-delights," she said, "sprinkled all through the grass. Some folks call it heart's-ease."

Martin came upright, his brow knitted. What did the soft speech recall? It seemed to set a link into a half-welded chain. He dared not notice the flower, lest it suggest something to

her also. But he thought he knew. Rising, he shook himself free of warmer fancies, like a dog shedding water. "Come," said he, "let's go home."

Alla rose, too, grieved at the dispelling of her dream. He strode along, thinking, a frown upon his brow. She, trotting after, like a wife used to that unregarded following, studied upon the change in him, and wondered what she could have done. At the door, she looked up at him, her brown eyes overflowing.

"You ain't mad?" she asked imploringly. She was very pretty, and Martin bent to reassure her. He was still thinking, yet the natural man in him bade her be comforted.

"Mad! No!" said he absently. But though he lifted his head without kissing her, two people could have sworn he meant to do it. One was Alla, and the other Mrs. Jeffries, looking on scornfully from the next room. So his mother mislaid her trumpet, and could not hear a word from Alla, all that day and the next.

But Martin, ignorant of these feminine coils, ran upstairs to his own room and his little book-case, where "Pilgrim's Progress" stood in the old spot. He took it down, glancing first at the top to compare its layer of dust with neighboring edges; for this corner his mother had

forborne to touch, ever since he had laid a defiling pipe upon the shelf. But now all the books were clean, and he swore softly. Either his mother had repented, or Alla had taken pity on his untidy state. He opened the book, and whirled the leaves. Where was the heart's-ease left there on the day when Nancy gave him the book in the little bare schoolroom? It was gone. Yet it had lain there undisturbed for many years. What a fool he had been not to remember! He remembered perfectly now; and he ran whistling down the stairs and caught his mother tumultuously about the waist.

"There! that'll do," she remarked dryly. "Enough's as good as a feast. An' next time you want to carry on, you can take somebody else's front entry. This house wa'n't ever made for doin's such as that. I don't know what your father'd say."

Her little body trembled; her eyes held needles for him. Martin looked at her in wonder. It dawned upon his unenlightened mind that now she was not "play mad" as of old, but in an honest fury. What for? He threw back his head and laughed.

"Jealous! My King!" cried he. "Jealous for Nancy! Hurrah for Jackson!" He imprinted a large and cordial kiss on her fiery

cheek, and then another. "Mother, you're an old darling!" he announced in a bellow. "A dar-ling! Hear? Was it because I went to walk? God sakes" — Then it occurred to him that he could not explain without enlightening the room overhead. And, still laughing, he let her go. He went off to find Nancy, and his mother, striving to accomplish that moral effect before he left the room, rushed to the roller-towel and rubbed her cheek.

But Nancy could not see him. She was lying down, her mother said, with a bad headache. It came on sudden.

Through this June weather Luke was working in his smithy, and patronage grew fast. Even the neighboring towns, hearing how he carried the stolen baby to a friendly shade and watched her between blows, remembered that he was an excellent smith, capable of turning his hand to anything. At intervals, he warmed milk for her over the coals, and glad were they who saw the administering thereof. One day Obed Horner came up with his old white horse, and while Luke pared hoofs, with one eye on the child, the grandfather stepped deprecatingly to her little nest, and looked down upon her. She soliloquized remotely, and tears came into his old eyes. He had never relinquished the

idea that the baby knew him ; now he thought bitterly she was "all Larrups." He stretched down his arms toward her, but Luke dropped his iron and set his gun within a nearer reach. Then he blew up the fire again.

"Lord sakes, Luke Evans," trembled the old man, "you would n't shoot an' run the resk o' hittin' that innocent child?"

"Shoot?" retorted Luke grimly. "Who said anything about shootin'?"

"I tell ye," said Obed in sudden heat, "you could be took up for havin' firearms 'round promisc'us so. You 'ain't no more right to go armed" —

"My old fowlin'-piece is there for foxes," announced Luke, hammering. "If one comes along" — He said no more. But Obed went home and told his wife that all her plans of rescue were naught concerning a man who would as soon shoot the child as eat — sooner.

On this day Luke had no patrons ; so he left his work at three, shouldered his gun, and went homeward, the child on his arm. He did not always use the little wagon now ; he had learned the habit of holding her, and her soft weight was pleasant to him. Luke knew, and owned to himself with a grim smile, the moment of his beginning to love her ; it was when she

took to abusing him, digging her hands into his hair, kicking him with rampant legs, and then laughing wantonly in his face. He hugged her close going up the hill, and put his cheek down softly, so that the whiskers should not hurt; a great trembling went over him when he thought her hair might yet be dark. She did not look like poor Milly. Perhaps her coloring would be his — and Nancy's.

That afternoon a new resolution grew within him, and in the early twilight he shaved and made his hair as sleek as deference demanded. Then, with the baby in its little cart, he went down the hill to call on Nancy. Why should he ignore the ways of other men? Why not choose his girl, and go honestly to seek her? Aunt Lindy answered his knock, but, finding him, she fled away and banged the door behind her.

"My soul, Susan, on'y you see what's out there in the path!" she panted, appearing in the kitchen, where her sister was wiping the last dish.

"What's the matter now?" asked Susan hardily. "Mercy! I should think the British had landed!" But she went to the door, and reached it with Nancy, who, pale and leaden-footed, came downstairs for a little walk in the dusk.

"Well, if ever I see!" cried Susan, her eyes on the baby. "If this don't beat all! On your way down along to gran'ma's?"

Luke frowned. His amiable besetment dried like a husk. Yet his eyes sought Nancy, unabashed. "I thought I'd come in a minute," he said to her imploringly.

"Sit down here on the porch, won't you?"

She seated herself as she spoke, leaving room for him at the other side. Susan turned about and went in, and Nancy could hear her remark to Aunt Lindy that some folks had brass enough to line a kettle. Later, a gentle and rhythmical creak sounded near the entry door, and she knew Aunt Lindy had drawn her chair to a point of vantage.

"I thought I'd come down an' set a spell," said Luke thickly.

"How's baby?" asked Nancy, regarding only the little contented thing, who seemed so gracious among untoward ways.

"Fust-rate. When should you give her suthin' solid?—bread or suthin'?"

Nancy frowned. "I don't know anything about it," she said, with decision; "you can ask Big Joan." She made a little involuntary movement, for Martin had turned in at the gate, and she had vowed not to see him. But now

he was near, and pride counseled her to stay. He came buoyantly up to them, hat in hand, the last flush of daylight lying upon his hair. His brows went up a trifle, but he spoke jocundly. It seemed to him that he had good news.

"'Evening, Nancy. H'are ye, Luke? Is that the young one? Hullo!"

The baby was not the only one who failed to answer. Luke gave a little grunt, and then looked at Nancy. For the first time since the baby's actual regnancy he wished it away. It gave Martin an advantage. He felt queerly burdened.

"Did you want to see mother?" asked Nancy stiffly.

"Oh no," returned Martin, with cheerfulness, "I came to see you."

"She's in the house."

"All right. It's nice out here."

But Susan did not remain in the house. She appeared suddenly in the entry, and, as Nancy knew, from a softer swish of skirts, Aunt Lindy was not far behind. Susan had borne much, but it was gall beyond her drinking to see Nancy sitting out there in the face of the world in such droll company.

"Luke Evans," quoth she, "I should think

you was bewitched to keep that baby out in the night air. If you've got anything to say, say it an' done with it; but don't for heaven's sake let her lay there breathin' in all this damp."

Luke rose like a shot. "I guess I'll be goin'," he said to Nancy.

There was defiance in his air, though not for her. He had been driven away, turned from another door only because he had tried to be like other folks. Her heart rose in champion-ship. She spoke sweetly, so sweetly that Martin looked at her in wonder:—

"I guess it is damp for her; but I'll come up to-morrow, and we'll talk it all over then."

Her mother gasped; so did Luke, at his good fortune. What was it they would talk over?—their coming days? Not so small a thing as the baby's diet. He gave her a rapturous look and went away, drawing his little cart.

"Well, if ever!" remarked Susan, and also disappeared. Her mind was momentarily at rest. Come good or ill to Nancy, she felt that Martin alone could deal with her. Nancy, conscious of having stumbled into a deeper slough, was no more serene for knowing it.

"It's getting cool," she said, with a heightened color. "I guess I'll go in."

"Not yet," returned Martin sharply. "Nancy, you don't want to get yourself talked about."

Nancy lifted her head, gander-like, as Martin had once told her. She thought of it now. "Talked about!" she repeated. "How?"

Martin astonished himself. When had he lost his temper before? But when had he seen such cause? "In the worst way," he said hotly. "I know you go up there and look after that baby. That's not so bad: only foolish. But it's got 'round he's going with you."

Anger rose in her. She trembled. "Why not?" she asked satirically. "Why not? Why should n't a man go with a girl? Seems to me I've seen you with one quite a lot lately." She could have bitten her recreant tongue for the admission. It gave him a key to her anger; he would use it. Martin threw back his head and laughed.

"So I did," said he. "What's sauce for the goose — See here, Nancy, I want you to tell me something." These love matters could wait for brighter times. He moved nearer and spoke in an undertone, defying Aunt Lindy. "You remember that day you gave me 'Pilgrim's Progress'?"

"Well, what of it?"

"Did n't you give me a flower, and did n't I put it somewheres and promise it should stay?"

Poor Nancy! She was learning that the

masculine heart may be pierced to the centre with the significance of mementos, and yet take no account of them until the day of reckoning.

"That's neither here nor there," she said in one of her mother's phrasings. Nancy always reproached herself for not remaining so elegant as she could wish under strong emotion. In sorrow or excitement she went back to homely speech, like a child fleeing to an apron.

"What was the flower?" persisted Martin. "What did I do with it?"

He wanted her testimony with no suggestive hint. Nancy spoke from a sense of outrage. He was going with another girl. She did not care for that; but he should never come here and resurrect the beginnings of dead tenderness.

"If you said you'd put it somewhere, I suppose you did. If you said it should stay there, I suppose it has. Why don't you look?"

Martin's hand was on the arm of her chair. He shook it a little, and she sat the straighter. "You need n't build up pick' fences 'round you," he said roughly. "It ain't necessary to-night. I ain't making love. I'm talking business. What was that flower?"

"Depends on the season," said Nancy, with a

fictitious lightness. "Let's see, when was it? What time of the year?"

"Why, you know," said Martin, deceived and injured, "my birthday!"

"And when was that?"

He got up and strode down the path, his hands in his pockets. Then he turned about and came back. He looked at her, and their eyes were on a level. "Nancy," said he deliberately, "you're enough to try the patience of a saint. I wonder — yes, I do wonder that I can be so possessed about you."

So he was still possessed! A little flicker stirred in her heart, but she put it out, with the conclusion that if he did not care for the other girl, it was all the worse. He had demeaned himself by flirting.

"Be good," he said coaxingly, "and tell me. Was it a wild flower?"

"I've got to go in," she told him, rising. "It's getting damp; mother said so." She had never seemed so inaccessible, her intelligence now as well as her heart.

"Nancy," cried Martin, "you'll drive me to drink! Oh, stop, stop! I don't mean that. It's only a form of speech. Sometimes it don't seem as if you knew once. But see here. I want to know if I put the flower into the 'Pil-

grim's Progress.' I think she's been into my room" —

"She?"

"Alla."

"Oh!" breathed Nancy, loftily indifferent.

But Martin knew too little of the ways of women folk to stop. "She's looked over my books," he said, absorbed in theory. "She borrowed some. Mother told me so, to make trouble. And suppose I did press the flower in the book, suppose I did pick up the first piece of paper handy, to press it in" —

Nancy could not see the road he stumbled on. She only knew that he and she and Alla were mixed in some sentimental complication, and she would none of it. "That will do, Martin Jeffries," she announced firmly, with what he called her air of District Number Four. "I'm going in. If you and Alla Mixon have got into some kind of a squabble, it's nothing to me. You can settle it between you."

She walked into the house, and Martin, left alone in the sweet summer night, did for a moment wonder what he should do with this impossible creature when he got her caged. But that he knew he could risk.

V

THE season was getting on. Bobolinks sang for dear life, and the musical scythe cut the air and then the grass, through acres of redtop and clover. The women, mixing sweetened water to carry afield, talked of many things ; and the men, in their nooning, talked too. Martin was going with Alla Mixon, so they said ; he had taken her to ride twice in a fortnight. Chance for some other feller up to Eliot's now. Nancy 'd get a crooked stick, though, if she took up with Luke Larrups. But it looked so. The Elder must be showing his years, for he had no meetings off on the mountain. He only went up there to pray, alone. He dropped in to the houses 'round and beseeched folks to have a good time. Not a word about hell fire ! And last Sunday, when Eph was getting in his hay before the shower, and the Elder hollered, "Six days shalt thou labor," and Eph hollered back, "That's right. We ain't had but five this week ; Wednesday was rainy !" the Elder only kind o' twinkled and went by. Well ! well ! he 'd hil' his own for a good many years now.

But the Elder was far from sinking into the acquiescence of age. He was taking his forty days of prayer and reflection before going out into a larger world to carry tidings he did not as yet know how to cry aloud. The inspirations of other men, save as he found them in the Bible, were sealed to him. These new thoughts coursing through his brain — had they ever bloomed on earth before? He thought not. He saw the vision, not of a world gone wrong, but of a world eternally right from the beginning. His Christ had once been the medicine for a distorted birth. Now He was the white image of divinity come to show the way. Yet how should he tell the message, and no one suffer harm?

He was sitting on the porch reflecting, his clasped hands on a knotted stick and his chin upon his hands. Miss Julia sat silent within the room behind, shelling peas. Nancy came droopingly up the walk. She had been for one of her visits to Alla Mixon, and with the same dreary result. Yet Alla was kinder than before, as one who has good fortune on her side; and when Nancy besought her to say whether there might not be another note, she only denied having seen any other, but added encouragingly : —

"Maybe we'll come across it some day."

Nancy came up to the old man with a dull step, and sat down at his feet. She fanned herself with her hat, and thought, from some faint wonder, how summer days had changed. Her eyes mirrored a shining world, all beauty; but her heart sat coldly in the midst. Looking at the Elder in the same unloving scrutiny, she wondered why he should have lost his spiritual power. He was no prophet now, — only a gentle, dear old man; she longed for the prophet back again.

"Elder Kent!" she called. He did not answer. "Elder Kent!" Then he awoke from his dream of glorified worlds. "You know I said I'd go with you?"

He nodded, looking at her kindly.

"Should you think — if mother needed me — it would make any difference?" She was stumbling among platitudes because the truth could not be told. What would it mean to him?

"You shall leave father and mother," he paraphrased raptly. But he was not thinking of her.

"I said I'd go," repeated Nancy, with heart-break in her voice; and he smiled upon her.

"Yes; you made a vow, a vow unto the Lord. You shall keep it, child. I will help you."

He thought she wanted to be held in the way ; and, meeting the sudden radiance of his smile, she also thought it, for the moment. Again she felt the constraining of his spiritual power, but without an answering exaltation. Now she saw only the dreariness of well-doing.

"When are you going?" she asked him hopelessly.

"In about a week. We might start on a Friday and be in Pillcott again in time for Sunday meeting. Then the factory folks are out. Be of good cheer," he heartened her. "You are not bargaining with God : yet it shall be blessed to you. Look at my sister. She has followed the cross through sun and snow, and her age is full of peace." Nancy, in spite of herself, glanced back at the old woman busy at her work. Julia had heard him, and she was laughing noiselessly, a laugh that hurts the beholder, for it has no mirth. "I will help you," he repeated. "You shall not turn back."

Then Nancy knew she was to go, and the fiat was just. She had vowed herself unto the Lord. If the sacrifice waxed heavy, so much the sweeter to make it for Him who gave up all for her. Yet in her olden dreams of crosses, she had never seen her mother suffering a sharper

pang than that of loneliness. Now she must tell her about the unfulfilled desire of both their hearts, and leave her to a barren life devoid of hope.

"Brother!" called Miss Julia from the sitting-room. Her voice rang sharply, and the Elder turned. "Brother, come in here," she commanded, and he went in haste. Her manner toward him was uniformly marked by the deference which befits a handmaid to the Lord's anointed; now he felt the change.

"Why, Julia," he asked, bending over her chair, "you sick?"

"No," she said steadily, "I'm well and in my right mind. I wish as much could be said of all. Brother, I don't want you should set a day to go."

"Why not?" asked the Elder wonderingly. He could not remember a time when she had questioned him. Her subserviency had not spoiled him; his nature was too sweet. But he was accustomed to think of her as the ministering and subordinate spirit, as a woman should be.

"I can't leave King's End." Julia did not look at him. Her voice sounded hard, her fingers moved like magic. "I don't know when I can leave."

"We 've been here some time."

"I pay as we go. I've worked like a silkworm. They beg and pray me not to work so hard. We're going to begin quilting to-day. I can settle for our board. Brother, I've got to stay." If he would yield without further beseeching, so much the better. But glancing up at him, she caught the abstraction of his gaze bent upon far-off issues. They were her enemies. She had a bitter sense that when religion comes into the field, human rights retire to the wall. He must be told. She held the pan tightly with both hands, and leaned back in her chair. Her gaze compelled an answering one. "Brother John," said she, "Judge Hill — Stuart Hill — is on his deathbed."

"I know it," replied the Elder unmoved. "I went over to see him, but they would n't let me in."

"He's on his deathbed," repeated Julia, as if she knocked at his dull brain. "And I shan't leave town until he's gone." He looked at her in a kindly questioning. A hopeless anger stirred her. In her eyes, this old woe loomed colossal; yet it was invisible to him, for whom her blood was paid. "Fifty odd year ago," she said roughly, "I wanted to marry him. I should if — if I could."

It is not easy to show the heart to our own kin. Because her mind dwelt always on this grief, she was keen to every phase of it. The picturesque aspect of it flashed before her at every point; and now she saw herself making that confidence blushing, as she might have done it those fifty odd years ago. The sharp reality of the contrast gave her a bitter amusement. The Elder, recalled to the life of this world, looked at her startled. Marrying was not for him. Never, in his first madness, had he guessed it was for her; and after that, she had been living her spiritually cloistered life. He laid his hand on one of hers, both gnarled and yellow.

"Poor Julia," he said tenderly. "I wish it had been different. I wish he could have cared."

She looked him in the face, and her seasoned spirit stood unflinching. So starved had she been, so silent in her chosen grave, that even this poor irony was soothing to her. Why should he know? Her phantom was one of an irrevocable past. Slowly her face relaxed. She smiled upon him with a kindliness greater than his own; she must always love the more because she knew the face of sacrifice. "We can't have everything," she said quietly. "It was something you never wanted, John."

"No," said the Elder, settling into a chair, while she went on with her work, "I never did. I was called — from the first. But now, when I'm almost ready to lay down my bones, I see how good the earth is — how sweet it is to them that live as nature does."

Her hands trembled over their task. At that moment, the ways of life seemed to her inscrutable. Why had he come so long a path to learn what any nesting bird could have told him years ago? "I'm glad you said it," he went on. "You need n't speak again; but we'll stay. Yes, we'll stay. I see what a hard row you've had to hoe, tramping here and yonder when you wanted a home and little things about you. That would have been better. That would have been nearer right. Well, I wish he'd cared." He got up and walked hastily away. She understood his shyness. He could hear the confessions of men and women who cried upon God, either in grief or sin, but because she was of his own blood, her soul must keep its veil before him. They had approached too near. Now they would stand outwardly aloof for a time, though that nearness could never be forgotten. So she sat and marveled over all the past, and plucked a little of the sweetness sure to blossom some time over graves.

Nancy, hearing their voices, had gone out to the garden beds ; but now that Elder Kent was sauntering down the road, she came in and, sitting down, regarded Julia absently. "What a lazy thing I am !" she said. "I let you and mother do it all. Give me the peas. I'll pick them over."

But Julia shook her head and tidily sifted out the refuse. She worked very hard and fast nowadays. It was easier.

"I suppose we must n't care about comfort, even for other folks," said Nancy irrelevantly, "or money. You gave up all you had, did n't you ?"

Julia smiled at her in a mild, satirical fashion.

"We had quite a piece of land," she answered, "and the old homestead, and some money. When mother died, John sold his half and gave it to the poor ; so I gave mine. I threw it in because I did n't care what 'come of me, and if I could have given my blood, I'd have done it. There are times when you can't go far enough."

"But God took care of you ?" asked Nancy timidly. She was thinking of her mother.

Julia smiled again, and stretched out her lean hands.

"That's what took care of us," she said. "I've sewed off the ends of all my fingers. He

thinks I do it because I like to help 'round. I've knit, and braided rags. Folks save up work three months ahead because old Julia's coming. You know how it is here in this house. Your mother's waited all summer to get that quilting done. We'll set it up this afternoon." She rose practically and took her way to the kitchen to seek another job.

But Nancy detained her with beseeching hand. "The Bible says, 'Take no thought,'" she ventured.

Julia paused, looking down into the pan, that same sad smile playing about her lips.

"I don't know anything about Bible sayings," she replied. "I've heard 'em so much they go into one ear and out of t'other. They're like the wind that blows. But here are we, brother and I. We turned over what we had to the poor-farm. They built two new barns with it, and lightning struck 'em, one after another, and they burnt to the ground. And we're old folks, and perhaps we shall die under a fence, and perhaps the county'll have to support us. That's all I know." She went on into the kitchen, but presently she came back, animated, fierce, as Nancy had seen her in the woods. "But I can tell you this," said she. "You can talk about calling and election all you like, but

you get to be an old woman, and this is what you've learned. We're made to live here, here in this world. Time enough for another when you get there. That's all. Your mother want the fire blazed?"

Still, Nancy knew she was to go. If God demanded the sacrifice of her mother as well as herself, should she refuse it?

That afternoon, as they were sitting about the quilting-frame, after Julia and Aunt Lindy had snapped the pattern, a wonderful thing happened. Mrs. Jeffries, who lived at peace with her neighbors but scorned to call on them, suddenly appeared in the way. She wore her best bonnet of ten years ago; for why should one debarred from church by her affliction, and from society by temperament, pluck the latest bloom on fashion's tree? It was a decent crape, her mourning for the doctor. But the day being hot, she eschewed her alpaca, and chose instead a sprigged lilac of an earlier date. No one in King's End would have thought of challenging the consistency of that mourning. The bonnet was its emblem, a part adequately standing for the whole. The four women rose at sight of her, and spools danced merrily on the quilt. Aunt Lindy fell into a state of petrification, recovering herself to mutter, "Well, forever!"

and put her thimble on and off her fat and freckled finger.

But Mrs. Jeffries remained unmoved.

"Don't let me discommode anybody," she remarked graciously. "I'll set right down here an' look on. Tumbler pattern, ain't it? Ever do a risin' sun?" It was Nancy she addressed, with a courteous persistency to which the girl was all unused. Did she not remember those years when Mrs. Jeffries had scorned her shy neighborliness, and all because Martin came a-courting? But she shouted her answer, looking, as she did so, expectantly for the trumpet.

"My ear trumpet, dear?" asked Mrs. Jeffries, in honeyed sympathy. "I forgot it. All I can do, I forgit suthin'. Sometimes it's my handkercher, an' sometimes it's my spec's. I dunno when it's been my trumpet."

Aunt Lindy rolled her eyes. "My heavenly Father!" she ejaculated. She knew all about this fashion of getting the talk to one's self.

"Awful to be tied to it, ain't it?" shrieked Susan, in shrill staccato.

"He's up to the new house," returned Mrs. Jeffries sweetly. "The carpenters are packin' up to-day. 'T won't be long before it's ready to go into." She nodded at Nancy, and Nancy, blushing, felt herself committed to the altar.

She was beginning to smile over the irony of life. Martin was giving her up just as his mother had "come 'round."

"I s'pose you 'll be packin' up to go in!" cried Susan, with a harmless indiscretion whiffing by unheeded.

"So I tell him," said Mrs. Jeffries. "There's real pretty papers now. I said only this mornin', 'I dunno's ever I see papers prettier 'n they be this year. But I don't trust you to pick 'em out. Better get somebody to help you,' says I." Again she smiled at Nancy.

Meantime Julia went on quilting deftly and thinking her own thoughts. The sound of her clicking thimble punctuated the talk. Aunt Lindy opened her mouth at intervals in a futile protest, and then closed it. "She's cranky as ever, for all she's so honeyed," she muttered to Julia. "What's she got into her head now?"

"Oh, don't, Aunt Lindy!" exclaimed Nancy hastily, but the rash one only muttered, "She can't hear!" and Mrs. Jeffries smiled impartially.

"Well, I must be goin'," she said at last. "Nancy, I meant to bring you a tumbler o' my new jell. I'll send it over. Martin'll be comin'."

Susan looked beseechingly at her daughter,

to forestall denial, and Mrs. Jeffries saw. "He's been ruther busy lately," she explained, "helpin' that Alla Mixon git her deeds an' things settled. But that won't last long. Law, it's 'most over now!" She took Nancy's hand in her mittened fingers, and Nancy knew at last that this was kindness and not contrary winds. And she was grateful. Some one wanted her, at least. "Well," concluded Mrs. Jeffries, "good-day. Come over an' see us." They nodded like cheerful mandarins, and she, adding the country formula, "So do! so do!" stepped briskly away down the path.

The four looked at her with varying interest, and Aunt Lindy from a ruthless skepticism.

"Well," asked she, "how long 's it goin' to last? You pass me that thread."

"Change of heart, I guess," commented Susan, glancing sharply at her daughter.

"I don't take much stock in it myself," continued Aunt Lindy.

A sudden apparition darkened the window: Mrs. Jeffries' crape-bound head. Susan gave a little cry, "My suz!" and Aunt Lindy, pricking her finger, echoed the monosyllable, "Suz!"

The guest still smiled with undiminished sweetness. "Nancy," she called. "You come out here a minute. I want to speak to you."

Nancy obeyed, and Mrs. Jeffries led her cautiously down to the gate, where they might talk unheard. She took the girl's hand and patted it. "You look real pale," said she.

"It is n't that!" cried Nancy, from a maiden shame. "I've had things happen to me."

But the visitor, still smiling, could not hear. "I want you to come down to tea some day soon," she said eagerly, "when that Alla goes. 'T won't be long. I'll let ye know." She looked in the girl's face with a strange, new tenderness. "There! there!" said she. "It'll all come out right." She went away down the road nodding and smiling, and Nancy, half vexed, half moved, went back to the house. Her mother met her, all excitement.

"Well," she began, "I guess it's easy to see which way the wind blows there. She dressed up an' come over here a-purpose to show she's on your side."

"Oh, mother!" cried Nancy, "I should think you'd be ashamed to talk so. There are n't any sides!"

"Yes, there is, too," said Susan stubbornly. "There's yours and Alla Mixon's. He's begun to go with her, an' not to blame either, you treated him so. An' his mother's come over here to call, an' show where she stan's. An' I'm glad an' thankful, for one."

"It's no use talking so, mother," said Nancy, from her depths of resolution. "I've nothing to do with such things. I told you before, I'm going to preach the gospel."

"Preach the fiddlestick!" cried Susan. "One night I lay awake thinkin' about that, an' the next you cut up to wash that baby, an' I'm worried to death. I wish you was like other girls."

That was a loving lie; but Nancy took it full in the heart, and bled. It seemed to her that only her mother's blame was needed to complete this bitter year. She would not answer, but she salved her wound by the certainty that some day everybody would be sorry. She went in and quilted in a thrifty martyrdom, and Susan, looking at her across the frame, thought achingly how entirely admirable she was. When they set the supper-table she did remark dryly, "You're a good girl," and Nancy was satisfied.

VI

So far the baby had played the part of an unresisting puppet ; now she took matters into her own hands and fell ill. With the first wail of suffering not to be accounted for by wind or a healthy temper, Luke's heart stopped its beating, only to bound again with that terrible premonitory throb born of fear for what we love. In that instant he realized that she was flesh of his flesh ; through loneliness, indeed, he had won to a double fatherhood. He loved her, — warm, perverse, exacting little bit of mortality. His natural self-confidence had not lessened in the main, through nursery warfare, though there had been days when, confronted by problems that only mothers tolerate, he hated her even while he loved. "God only knows what I'm goin' to do," he got in the habit of muttering when he dressed her ; God might be a myth, but the phrase had not lost potency. Yet, one after another, those gales had been weathered, and he took heart. She was a trouble, that he owned to himself, but a

trouble he could manage. It was not so hard to take care of a baby, after all.

But that triumph was of yesterday. Now, when she cried without ceasing, and her cheek grew angry red, he was beside himself. Should he go down into the village and ask for old wives' wisdom? Own himself beaten, and have the story carried to Horner's? Or should he fly for a doctor, only to be given that odious recipe of "woman's care"? Neither, quite yet. But the smithy was closed, and no one saw him trundling the little cart "down along" to the store. Big Joan came up and stood colossal in the road. Luke saw her, and held his purpose with an iron hand, lest he weaken and beg her to come in. At that moment the baby was asleep; so he stood by the window and answered his besieger, glance for glance.

"Yes," she said coolly, "I've come up to spy out the land. Mis' Horner says you've killed an' eat her. Where is she?"

"She's on my bed."

"How's she look?"

"Same's any young one, I s'pose."

Joan shook her head at him, and, with an incidental movement of her huge arm, tossed aside a fallen branch. "When she come up here," she answered, "she wa'n't same as any.

She was the fattest baby ever I see: like a Mullingar heifer, beef to the heels."

"You'll wake her up," he warned her hastily, lest that betraying wail begin again. "How 's old Mis' Horner?"

"Sick. Wore out cryin'. Yeller 's a duck's foot."

Luke smiled, because smiling made a part of his warfare, but he was conscious of not really wishing ill to anybody. If the child could live, and look at him again with impish eyes, he knew, in his sick soul, how little he cared about the downfall of his enemies.

"Don't you want the rest of her clo'es?" asked Joan.

"No; I'm goin' to pay, byme-by, for what I've had. I tore that dress she had on when she come, but I can make it good."

"That old sprig? Law! 't wa'n't wuth the powder to blow it up. What you so slicked up for, 'round the yard?"

Luke frowned. He had cleared his mountain lawn, and piled a brush-heap beside the house. He was only waiting for a north wind before burning it. Nancy should find the little domain snug and trim when she chose to come. He turned away without answering, and Big Joan, calmly cognizant of human warfare and

the beauty of peace, swung down the hillside, holding her skirts above mammoth ankles. Many years ago Joan had been in love, and she had recovered from that fever, strong to enjoy the breath of life and let her neighbors draw it as they chose. She would not "meddle nor make:" not because, like the village, she dreaded hostile spirits, but because she was now only a looker-on. She still loved the baby, yet not too much. Joan was sworn not to depend on any answering kindness. She knew it would be well for Luke to sink the feud and let the child come sanely home,—yet it was not hers to urge the crisis.

After she was gone, he had a moment of that quietude begot, in trouble, from the ring of friendly words. The house seemed less lonely. When the baby awoke, she must be better. But she was not better; and he spent the rest of the day in a fevered tendance upon her, walking up and down the little room, singing. And because he knew no soothing tunes, he sang,

"Jesus, lover of my soul,"

and never thought of irony. Tunes were of no use, save to put babies to sleep.

At nightfall she did drowse a little, and, worn with anxiety, sick from lack of food, he looked

upon her with an agonizing gaze. In the dusk of the room she seemed unreal and pitiful, — a poor little changeling whimpering away from life. He rushed out of the house and ran, hatless and distraught, down the hill and into the Eliot yard. Nancy was on the porch alone. The very sight of her seemed a deliverance, her solitude a happy omen. She was brooding there in the dark, her head bent low. Nancy looked very sweet and real, but she felt old from the perplexity of a universe gone wrong. She started when Luke appeared before her, running noiselessly in his old shoes, and shadowy as a night bird. His face foreboded tragedy.

“Oh, Nancy!” he gasped, “come out a minute. I don’t want anybody to hear.” She hesitated, and he besought her. “Suthin’ ’s happened. Oh, Nancy, come!”

“Is it the baby?” she whispered, following him down the path. He opened the gate for her, and they stepped out into the road. He turned homeward, and Nancy, with her old sense of following the spirit, kept pace with him. He was drawing dreadful breaths, every one a sob, and her heart ached to comfort him. “Is it the baby?” she asked again.

He stopped a moment and looked up into the dark sky. “She’s sick,” he groaned at last.

"You've got to have somebody that knows more than I," said Nancy, pausing; but he started on, fearing to let her hesitate. She followed him, irresolute.

"You come," he urged, looking back at her. "You tell me what you think, an' we'll see what's best. I'll do it. Yes, I'll do it, Nancy, if you'll only tell."

She thought his mind was with the child; so she might be frankly sorry for him. But the relief of her presence was acute, and he grew almost happy with the exaltation of trouble under the shining of great joy. Her quietude seemed like that of mother and wife in one.

"Nancy!" he cried, "Nancy!"

"Yes."

"Stop a minute right here. I've got to stop. I've been on the go two days an' three nights. I guess I ain't eat much either. Wait one minute." He stood trembling beside her, and Nancy waited in a sweet, maternal patience. He turned to her sharply, but his voice fell low: "Nancy, I can't ever let you go. I've got to have you. Oh, Nancy! Will you?"

His need of her called loudly, and all her old ascetic spirit sprang up and ranged itself with him. If she wished to do God service, was not this her place? When he should believe and

bow the knee, perhaps they might go together and win souls. Puritan tradition was strong in her; she deified the harder task only because it was too hard.

"I can't promise," she answered slowly. "I've got to talk with the Elder. But maybe I will."

She spoke innocently, foreseeing nothing; but that instant his arms were about her, and she felt his breath upon her cheek. There was a rustling in the field near by, but that she did not hear, to be impressed as she had been lately with the certainty that some one followed her when she went out after dark. She heard nothing and knew nothing save that Luke was holding her in a hideous mastery. Without conscious will of her own, she set her hands against his breast and pushed him from her. He fell to one side, impelled not only by her touch but the moral impact of her recoil. "Oh!" cried Nancy fiercely, "I hate you!"

A man jumped over the fence above and came walking along the road. It was Martin Jeffries. He passed them with a nod and went on. Had he seen? How much had he seen? Nancy felt, in the double revulsion, as if her world reeled under her. It was sufficiently against the course of nature to think of Martin with

another girl; it was a deeper stain that he should find her also light o' love. Thrown from that high altitude whence she was accustomed to reprove him, indignation surged in her, but only against the man at her side.

"Oh!" she cried to Luke, "oh, how I do hate you!"

He stood still, his arms hanging. Nancy would have fled homeward, save that she feared encountering the other man; for sure though she was that love lay dead between them, she trembled back from his reproach. So she waited and said again, as an excuse for staying, "I hate you!"

Luke moved toward her gropingly. "You said maybe you would," he muttered.

His hoarse voice sickened her.

"But you need n't have come near me!" she cried. "It's one thing to go up and take care of folks; it's another— Oh, my soul! my soul!" She put her hands to her face and brushed angrily at the splashing tears. "We won't have any more mistakes about this. Don't you ever come near me again. If the baby's sick, you go down and tell Big Joan. I won't step foot in your house."

She turned and fled; and Luke, weakly stumbling toward the home he feared to reach,

heard only three words beating at his ears : "I hate you ! I hate you !" He dragged himself up to the little house, lying dark and very still. Was the baby dead ? He did not care. But when he had struck a light, dropping one match after another from a nerveless hand, he found that the baby was awake, that she was no better — and he did care. She had cried herself into a piteous acquiescence, and while she lay blinking under the light, unlovely in her misery, he felt within him the welding of human ties. This little thing had never turned against him. She was his.

"O God !" he groaned. "O God !" and falling prone beside her, he prayed. Whatever he said, it was from an unfathered heart to the Tyrant above who had cunningly waited for the moment of keenest need to pounce upon him. He seemed to himself a beleaguered soul, who, now that starvation lurked within the citadel, must capitulate to an enemy omnipotently armed.

"I'll do anything," he kept saying, "if You'll only let her be." He tried drearily to remember phrases he had once called cant, in case they should be fleeter-winged to reach the ear accustomed to them, as in time of sickness we seek a formula of cure. But all he could do

was to moan, "I'll do anything, anything!" What tribute had he to offer to the Tyrant? His heathen fetish, his wicked books! He gathered them in his arms, ran with them to the yard, and tossed them on his pile of brush. Never mind where the wind lay. Though the house went with them, they should burn. He and the baby could flee out into the night, still safe, if the heavenly foe could only be appeased. He touched a match to his sacrificial pile, and the dry brush burned. He stood by it, shaking in a fanatical frenzy, and when the wind caught up a shower of sparks and rained them on the house, he only smiled. Let the One above either burn or slay as pleased Him. God would save what He chose. It was futile to combat heaven.

Sally Horner, a quivering thing chained to a bed of nettles, lay in her room at the foot of the hill. Big Joan was out neighboring, and Obed sat on the kitchen doorstone, smoking a placid pipe. To the woman with an inert body and seething heart, it seemed as if the powers of all the world were leagued against her. Night after night she had lain there in the dusk, listening to the hideous summer sounds, and planning what she would do if, like the exasperating creatures about her, she had her legs. It would

be easy then to scale colossal heights. She made no limit to her achievements. All she needed was to walk the earth again. Hurrying plans, all futile, pieced themselves together in her head. Obed had promised that after haying he would drive over to Ryde and ask a lawyer about "the rights on't;" but she knew the cause of his delay. It was neither haying nor any other ancient reason made to put off women folks. It was because the lawyer, holding with her, would spur him on to action; and Luke, offended, then might burn his barn! So, resolved to take counsel of none, since all betrayed her, she lay praying her fiery prayers and scoffing at herself for wasted words. Luke's bonfire blossomed rosily, a gorgeous flower of night. The horror of it held her silent. His house was burning, and he might be away from home. Where was the baby? She had learned her lesson well; nobody would help her. Not a word did she speak to Obed, sitting out there with his pipe, mourning the family crosses. She threw back the sheet and, with an old-time motion of her youth, when she used to spring out of bed for a day's spinning, set her feet upon the floor. Where were her clothes? Some of them in the bedroom, and groping there, she unearthed from a wilderness of calico

the articles known as a short-gown and petticoat, and threw them on. There were no shoes, but she found a pair of old rubbers, and slipped them on her feet. Then, as she was, not covering her night-capped head, she ran noiselessly into the road and up the hill. She had the strength of those under divine constraining. Sand sifted into her rubbers in her shuffling run, and once, with a muttered exclamation that was not of the sanctuary, she stopped to shake them free. Through all her journey she thought of nothing; not her past weakness, nor the beauty of the night and her own good fortune in hastening, untrammelled, through it. She only knew she was in haste.

And so she came upon Luke, standing by his bonfire, and still tending it with a mechanical zeal. The books were burned; but he was throwing on limb after limb from his woodpile near at hand. Even their ashes must be consumed. His face glowed crimson from the heat; with wild eyes and hair disordered, he seemed beside himself, — a demon raking the embers hither and thither with a green sapling, and ever feeding the flame. To Sally Horner's one glance, cast upon him in passing, he loomed malignant, though no more terrible than her mind had ever pictured him. She flitted past

into the house, and he, recovering from the sight of her night-capped head, followed. When he entered, she was on the floor by the lounge, where the child lay fretting. Her soft old cheek was against the baby's foot. She seemed to be devouring it with love. Luke smiled bitterly, and told himself that this was the answer he might have expected. God had sent his enemy. Yet when he saw how her hands dwelt upon the baby without disturbing it, when he guessed how the mother-hunger had ached in her since she was a young wife and her own child fed at her breast, he fell back a step and forbore to sneer. He loved the child; but here was a love he could not weigh, because it struck root in primal being. This was the little bit of earth that held her to the earth.

His step was noiseless, but she felt him near. When she could withdraw her hungry eyes from the untidy little creature, she glanced up at him, quite incidentally, as if already sure of victory. "Is ary one through?" she asked.

"One what?" inquired the uninitiated male.

She inserted her finger gently between the child's lips, and the baby mumbled at it.

"Poor little creatur'!" purred Mrs. Horner. "Granny's girl! Poor little creatur'! All swelled up, ain't they, darlin'? Ache like all

possessed! What'd you give her to cut 'em on?" she asked briskly, addressing Luke.

"Cut what?"

"Did n't you give her anything? Not a ring, nor even an old door knob? My soul! I should n't think men folks knew enough to go in when it rains. I wonder they open their mouths for feedin' time."

The bucket in the well went down with a prolonged rumble, but neither of them noticed.

"Here's the ladder!" called a man without, and Big Joan responded:—

"Up with ye! You're the lightest. I'll pass the pails."

But the two within were absorbed in their nursery talk; they had forgotten to be enemies.

"She's been awful sick," volunteered Luke, noting with a sacrificial pang how the child turned to the tenderer touch.

"She's awful sick now. Ain't you done nothin' for her?"

"I went over to the herb-woman." He spoke weakly, knowing the fact was vulnerable. "She told me to steep some catnip."

"Catnip! My soul! Did you tell her she was teethin'?"

"I did n't know it," confessed Luke, from a humility never induced in him by the powers above.

" Luke Evans, you better come out an' bring the baby!" called Big Joan at the door. " Your house's afire. The shingles are ketched. We're doin' all we can to save it."

Mrs. Horner gathered the baby into her arms, and ran out across the road. There she sat down upon a mossy bank, and held the child delightedly. Luke followed, with no sort of interest, to see Elder Kent standing on the roof, while Joan passed him pails of water in a marvelous succession.

" Come along down!" called the householder. " Let the damn thing go!"

" House an' barn?" inquired Joan, letting down the bucket with a clang. She loved the occasion. It fitted her great strength.

" The whole business. Let her burn."

Elder Kent opened his lips and began singing, because he could work faster, as the rhythm-led sailor pulls at the ropes : —

" How lost was my condition !"

and Big Joan sang too, with a love of sound if not significance. Her cross was at her throat, and good St. Joseph in her pocket; but she could "join in," with any heretic. The world was very big to Joan. She caught a tin milk-pail from the stake, and forced it into Luke's unwilling hand.

"Here," said she dryly, "you take this. T'other's heftier." She gave him a little admonitory push toward the well; and because she would not yield, he had to. Only to rid himself of human things, he fought the fire as madly as he had builded it, his face already distorted with a pain not yet quite recognized. When only the smell of smoke lingered in the hot air, Joan turned down her sleeves and wiped her face with her apron, dripping wet. She crossed the road to old Mrs. Horner, sitting there lulling the child in a happy dream.

"How'd you get out o' bed?" she asked.

Sally Horner started. Bed? nothing could be further from her thoughts. She was in Paradise. Asked how she came there, she felt a tremor, like any other way-worn soul. "I guess I'll be gettin' down along home," she said faintly. "Joan, I dunno's I *can* git there."

It was the moment of a lifetime. Joan saw it, and chose her course. "Lemme carry the baby into the house," said she indifferently. "Then I'll help ye down the hill."

Old Mrs. Horner straightened. "Leave the baby?" cried she. "I'd ruther die in my tracks!" Her eyes followed Luke, bearing the ladder to the barn. She rose and stumbled, but gathered herself again. "She's terrible heavy,"

she murmured, "but I can lug her. Quick! 'fore he turns the corner!" She started down the hill, Joan following and watching her with keen intelligence.

Joan felt quite safe in the plenitude of her strength and quickness. She had no mind that either the child or the old woman should fall. She was pleased, too, with her own forbearance in merely following on when, coming homeward earlier, she had seen Mrs. Horner scudding out into the night. It showed her anew that mortal kind was meant to work out its own salvation.

Safely away from the house, in the shade of the old white pine, Sally Horner paused and then sank, not weakly, but with a husbanded strength, upon the rock below.

"Joan," said she, "you go back an' have a word with him. He's treated me decent enough to-night, an' I s'pose he does set by the little creatur'. You go an' ask him — tell him I've took her. Ask him" — She choked upon the words. A moral decency constrained her. What if he refused? Should her claim be yielded? She did not know. The touch of that small, hot hand was stronger upon her than fear of law or gospel. Joan was three steps away when she called again: "Joan, tell him — tell him he can come an' see her. He'll

be welcome." It was a concession, but little enough to buy her treasure back. More than that, she had learned through bitter want what loss might mean to an unfriended soul.

Joan went into the cottage where the two men sat, on either side the fireplace, by the light of a single candle. Luke's head hung low, and he gazed at the uneven bricks. He remembered dimly how he had swept the hearth that morning lest Nancy should come. The dust was there already. So soon was work undone. The Elder seemed like a silent watcher beside the sick or dead. Luke glanced up, his eyes all lustreless.

"What is it now?" he asked.

Joan hesitated, filled with a sudden mercy. She could not see, from her own detached place in life, how human things should suffer so, in traps of their own contriving. She pitied them, as we pity a stumbling child. They seemed to her like the midges circling now about the light. Still, her eye on one silly moth, she swept him away, and saved him, for the moment, from the flames.

"She wants you should come down an' see the baby, whenever you feel to."

He gave a little gesture of dismissal, with a trembling hand. "My pipe's out," he told her. "I've got no more to say."

Joan knew too much to probe him further. She turned away, beckoning the Elder after her. "Ask him to make you some tea," she whispered at the door. "Make him drink some. He's crazed." She hurried into the night, and Elder Kent, as simply as a child, went back and asked for food. He was beat out, he said, with a recurrence to homely speech, always a custom when common sorrows cried for help. Might he have some tea?

Luke went heavily about making it, and when the table was spread, fell to and ate. He fed like a man whose mind is elsewhere, but in whom the mechanism of life, once started, goes clicking on, in spite of him. Then he drowsed a little, and the Elder bade him lie down a spell. But at the mention of quiescence, Luke was all alive again; and it was only when he had dulled himself anew with napping, that the Elder rose and led him unresisting to his bed. There he slept till day.

Out of that slumber he awoke with the sense of premonition attending a struggle not yet ended. The nerves came blindly back to feeling, like slaves who remembered the scourge of yesterday. On such mornings, the senses crawl forth miserably; they are passive before the gods. "What do you ask of me to-day?" they

beseech quiveringly. "Yet do not tell me. Let it be laid on ounce by ounce. Let me not recognize nor anticipate." So Luke came alive. At first he lay there, refusing conscious pain. Then his eyes grew hot with tears. He was alone: doubly so, bereft of the warm little presence he had grown to love, bereft of the girl whose memory lingered yet about the place. He turned on his pillow, and sobbed despairingly.

"How lost was my condition!"

rose in a mellow triumph from the room beyond. The Elder was stepping about, getting breakfast, and because he was unused to service, droll deeds were doing there. Luke heard him, and rubbed his eyes. For the moment, he knew what it is to be a child; only the Elder was his father, not the tyrant God. Stumbling and shamefaced, he went into the kitchen, and found the old man watching the fire in a serene content. "I have found the eggs," said Elder Kent, mildly triumphant, "and some coffee. But I should hardly ventur' to cook anything."

Luke plunged his face into cold water, and felt the life of the body surging up to meet the taint of death within the soul. He cooked the breakfast, with a careful thrift, and they ate

together. Then the Elder repeated the Lord's Prayer alone, to the Amen ; but Luke could only stare vacantly out through the open door at the fringing woods and feel his pain, as the brute feels it, unhealed by memory or hope.

"Now I'll be off," said the Elder. "I'm going to cut across lots over to Pillcott, and see when they plan to have camp-meeting. But I shall come back." He went swiftly, like those who feel themselves to be divinely sent. On the pasture upland, hearing the sound of footsteps, he turned about. Luke, afraid of solitude, was following on behind. He could not be alone.

Keenly as the Elder seemed to feel all sorrow, perhaps he never quite understood the human heart, save when it longed for righteousness. To him, the rending of mortal ties meant only an alarum sounded to strengthen heavenly ones. Just what doglike devotion had sprung up in Luke's heart, he did not know. But he did guess that here was one who, whether consciously or not, thirsted after the living God ; and he held out a hand in welcome. But Luke hardly looked at him. He came striding on in silence, humiliated by his need, yet not defying it ; and all day they walked together. When, at Pillcott, the Elder talked to one or another, Luke

stood by, not listening. He bought bread and cheese, and they went back into the woods and sat all the afternoon long by a little dark spring on the edge of the pines. The Elder's mind was on his mission, what he had learned, and what he should show to others; but Luke sat in a deadly dullness. To be near this human thing, so warm and yet aloof and unexacting, was like a soft air upon the face. It fanned a little, though it could not heal.

On their homeward track, they came to a parting of the ways, and Luke took the one leading by a roundabout course straight into the village. Elder Kent followed him without question, and in the late afternoon they walked up the road toward Sally Horner's. The Elder tramped steadily, his head bent and a little to one side, as if thought were too heavy for him; Luke was the one to follow now. They seemed to have no connection in their journeying. So lax was the Elder's hold on human affairs that he forgot what significance the Horner place must have for his companion, and Luke, keeping an eye on his plodding form, wondered if he would go in to inquire whether the baby were alive or dead. The windows stood wide open to the summer breeze, and seeing that, the stricture on his throat gave way a little.

If the child were dead, they would have closed the blinds and turned the house into one of mourning.

A rabble of men and boys appeared in the mown field across the way, striking out toward the road. They talked excitedly, and mopped their streaming faces. Luke stopped opposite the Horner gate, awaiting them; to his irritated anticipation, it seemed now as if any village stir meant further harrying. He remembered the gang sent up to rescue the child and, morbidly keen to any touch of omen, wondered if this, too, could have something to do with him. The Elder, missing the sound of his footfall, paused also, and those King's End sons and fathers, coming on with heavy tread, strode over the wall. Their boots were caked with mud, and Eph Cummings carried a great coil of rope, looped loosely. They nodded, with little grunts of recognition, but though the usual "How-are-ye's?" were lacking, it was not from harsh intention. They remembered that, Luke had been concerned in an emotional scene, the night before, and, knowing their own hatred of town talk, were shamefaced for him. But Obed dropped silently out of the crowd, and slipped in at his own gate. He hurried into the house and shut the door, without a glance behind.

Luke understood. Obed was going in to hide the child, or at least to put his women folk on guard. So the fools about him, having given him a bad name, were bent on his deserving it ! The men dispersed, all but Eph Cummings, who, when social cogs turned rusty, could never, for his life, withhold the oil of pottering talk.

"Be'n down to the old shaker-bed to haul out Kane's wild heifer !" he explained amicably. "In up to the belly. Hardly stren'th to loo. Thin as a rail, though, jumpin' fences, or we never could ha' stirred her without tackle an' falls. Too beat out to be driv' home. Kane hopped her there. Expect the Elder'll be down exhortin' of her arter dark."

The Elder smiled a little and went on. But Eph nudged Luke and gave him the wink of comradeship. "Say," he volunteered, in genial acceptance of confirming testimony, "d'ye know Sally Horner's up an' round?"

Luke nodded. He was hungry for news.

"There's Joan !" cried Eph joyously. He saw no reason why curiosity should go unslaked. "Now you up an' ask her. She's got suthin' to say."

But Luke stood still, sick at that moment from the clarity of afternoon sunlight ; it left no dark to hide in. He looked down into the

dusty road, and absently shuffled his feet, as a boy does when the world confronts him. Joan paused at the gate. The sun, lying on her red hair, her shrewd face, and arms bare to the elbow, turned her into a messenger of good ; but Luke, even if he had looked at her, had no heart for wise interpreting.

“Come along in an’ see her,” she called, and Eph gave him a seconding push. Luke shook his head. Hysterical passion was rising in him ; he knew how much more likely it was that he should be bidden to look upon the child dead than living. “They called the new doctor, the one over to Ryde,” said Joan satirically. “A little white stuff in two tumblers, an’ a clean spoon for each ! It’s like the water o’ Glaskie, it neither smells nor tastes. But the fever’s gone down ; I’ll say that for him.”

Luke gained a momentary courage. His dry lips moved.

“Then she ain’t ” — he faltered.

“Ain’t what ? ”

“I thought she must be dead.”

“You thought ! ” Joan raged, in scornful kindness. “You’d think anything to be on t’other side o’ the fence. She looks more or less like a baby now. If I’d had my way, I’d set her up for a scarecrow, the style you fixed her.

Come in an' look at her, an' drink down a cup o' tea. Mis' Horner's so tickled she'd break bread with the devil."

But Luke set forth at a quickened step up the hill. He passed the Elder with averted face, set on betraying none of that fierce joy within him. "Only let her be!" he kept whispering to the unknown God; and so he hurried on to his shelter, as remote from all that homely life below as an eagle's nest in the top of the great pine — and as lonesome.

VII

AFTER tragedy is well over, the real agony begins. When the desolate house looks about on its own nakedness, then is the true inventory of loss. Luke sat that night in his little kitchen and, staring at the moonlight on the floor, shuddered at life as it was and as it would be to-morrow. He saw only one thing, like a face filling up the darkness. His lips had no name for it, but the defeated soul called it destiny. This house had seen his beginning: two muddy streams of hateful ancestry tending together and mingling in one blacker still. His mother, a crystal current, had been swept on unnoted, and his father, shamelessly acquiescent, reflected all the vices of squalid forbears. Luke lifted his hands, in their fancied fetters, and would have clenched them in the face of the Power that first created and then tortured him. But he dared not. The Power might slay the child. At times he remembered Nancy, though not to mourn for her as a man in health mourns his defeated hopes. The cruelty of her repulse had ranged

her with his enemies. Her refusal was not what any man has a right to expect from the woman he loves in vain, and he felt still the lashing of her inherited scorn. He knew, as he sat there, that the moment of her recoil from him was the one when he had given up. He had made a fair trial of life, and it was not for him. Here he was, sober, hard-working, and yet a Larrups. Because he had been neither rich nor religious, and most of all because his stream was muddied at the fount, he must serve and get no wages out of life. His tortuous way led back to the mysterious wrong of having himself been born; for he knew these country folk were not impressed by money, nor greatly through church membership. Still they did prize honest stock. So the old sore festered in him, and again he told himself that life was done.

The room darkened like an omen, as the moon went under a cloud, and he sickened at its loneliness. So used was he to the child's light movements, that he began to listen for breathing in the dark. Walls were hateful to him. He took his gun from the corner, and crept out into the night. Yet he was not alone. All the phantoms of the place pursued him. While he stood outside, the heavens brightened. It was

one of those nights when clouds fleet over a clear sky, and alternately obscure the moon or are dyed, by her witchery, rainbow-ringed. He paused on his way downhill and looked back at the little house: for something told him he should never see it again. His farewell to it was included in the greater farewell to life itself. Then, heavy under his load of failure, he walked on, his gun over his shoulder and his brain perplexed. He meant to seek the "open door," so hospitable to souls distraught, but he was clumsy about the way. These country people despised the man who takes his own life; almost as well, thought they, to be a murderer as a suicide. He was resolved to die by his own hand, yet he wanted to die cleverly, as if by accident. For there was the child. If she lived, no one should point and whisper, "Her mother" — the voice would fall there. "Her father killed himself." So he held his old fowling-piece closer and went on, confused.

The Eliot house lay dark. One glance told him that, and he walked by without turning his head again. He thought there was a murmur of women's voices from the steps, and he strode the faster. If he should meet Nancy now, he could not look at her. If she held out her hand, he would not speak. She was a part of the

world where he ate and slept, but where he had no right of holding. At the Horners' he walked softly, and scanned the windows with an anxious care. The two front rooms were dark, and a little glimmer of light diffused itself delicately from the back of the house, where a kitchen lamp was burning. Luke caught himself shaking all over as he stood there, till a certain note arose and pierced him with delight: the baby's crying. It sounded far less piteous; it was even masterful.

"Little devil!" he muttered admiringly.

The kitchen lamp came into the sitting-room, and with it Mrs. Horner's head silhouetted against the light. She bent over the cradle, and he could see her swaying it back and forth. "Joan, you come in here an' help lift her up," he heard her call.

Joan, hanging her milkpails on the stakes, chose, instead, to walk around the side of the house, and down the path to the road. "Stop where ye be!" she ordered, as Luke was moving on. "News from the front." He waited, and Joan came up to him, pulling down her sleeves. "Glory be to God! the boot 's on t'other foot," said she. "I've hung round the mountain long enough, listenin' for that little pint o' cider, an' now you can take your turn. Livin' 's

nothin' but a teeter-board : first you go up and then it's me. Comin' in ?”

“No.”

“I s'pose not. If anybody told ye not to, you'd break in an' take root. Oh, she holds her own ! She's got too much father an' grandmother in her to peter out. But it's the greatest go-round for a teethin' this county ever see. It'll be in the almanac another year. What you got that gun for ?”

This, he knew, was his chance for some plausible story which should account for him afterwards. But he did not know what story. “I thought I'd take it along,” he said lamely. “I thought maybe I'd go on the tramp.”

“Tramp ! you tramp home an' go to bed, an' open the shop to-morrer. Law ! I should think life was a mile long, the way you squander it, runnin' 'round with your head cut off. Tramp ! which way you goin' ?”

Chiefly because the words were in his memory, he answered, “Over t' the shaker-bed. Likely's not that heifer's loose, by now.”

The heifer was not Joan's business, nor, since he rejected her counsel, was he. So she gave a glance at the moon, quite as if she were on equal terms with it, remarked, “Nice, ain't it ? Light as cork !” and returned to the house.

Luke, only because chance had marked out his way, wandered through the field to the lowland pasture, significant from the bog with its treacherous acre where more than one beast had been snared. King's End said the shaker-bed had no bottom. For the accepted chronicle of the place, you might ask any boy old enough to talk and swap stories. An inherited set of legends followed it to the centre of the earth, where victims lay, all neatly packed in one big pyramid. Now it was drawing Luke, not only by its eeriness, but from the wealth of that dark legendry. If he should never be seen again, Joan would tell how he went down to the shaker-bed to look after the heifer. And he need not be found; for, faithful to his traditions, he knew the bog had no bottom, as indubitably as he knew it twenty years before. To be dragged under, by that invisible force, was still a horror beyond his tolerating; but, with his arms free, he could use his old shooting-piece, even though the slimy trap had him by the feet — and then the earth, an enemy to the last, would clutch him to his burial. The theory worked quite simply: so simply that it read like a story about some one else whose griefs were long since over.

He climbed the fence, and broke through the skirting alders and the lighter growth of the

lowland. Then suddenly he seemed to fall into a dream. For a voice called him by his name.

"Luke!" it sounded, and again, "Luke! Luke!"

He stood still, and the brush about him trembled to rest where he had stirred it. The moon sailed into a space of blue, and her revealing was more terrible than the dark. "Luke!" rang the voice. "Luke!" The tremor of fear crawled over him, spine and scalp, and moved the hair upon his head. He heard, in his own mind, like an attendant echo, the words from an old story: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" They made him aware that, not for the child but for himself, he feared the unknown God.

A long, sharp bellow cut the air, and he almost cried out with it, though next moment he swore at himself and broke into shamefaced laughter. It was the heifer, calling in pain or fright; and upon her cry came the voice again, "Luke! Luke Evans!" Now he breathed again, and for a childish reason; for some inner sense told him that though God might summon him as Luke, surnames were unknown in the court of heaven.

"Oh, you everlastin' old fool!" he yelled in answer, and started on a run. His death-hunger lay behind, cast by as the swimmer throws off

weight. The Elder was in trouble. The slope grew thick with rankest grass, and plunging down, Luke halted at the bog. The preacher was singing now, —

“All hail the power of Jesus’ name,”

but the words came huskily, and Luke knew why. He saw, in fancy, the mud up to the old man’s chin.

“Hush up!” he cried. “Stop that, an’ tell me where you be!”

But the Elder adjured him to “Bring forth the royal diadem,” and then, after a triumphant slur on “Lord of all,” replied cheerfully, “In the shaker-bed.”

“Which side? This damn moon won’t be out for a fortnight.”

The shuddering bellow rent the air again, and Luke, running at random, put his hand on the heifer’s flank. He felt her over, while she pulled away from him, unable to free herself. He made out that she had broken from her tether on the higher ground above, and, with her head tied down as they had left her, had either fallen or plunged here, and caught herself again in a trap of her own making; for she had trailed the rope into a group of alders, and now her head was close to the ground, where she snorted

in misery. He tugged at the rope and sawed at it with his old jackknife; again he pulled desperately, and when it parted, she stood silent an instant over incredible liberty, and then, bounding up the slope, went breaking and crackling through the woods. And he had the rope, though threaded yet through the alders.

"Where'd you get in?" he called, listening as he worked. "Horner side?"

"Yes."

"How deep?"

"I don't rightly know."

Luke had a length of rope, and coiled it over his arm. "Why under heavens can't you speak up?" he cried. "What do you want to mumble so for?"

"I can't help it. My mouth's 'most in the mud."

"Lord God! you ain't in up to there? I can't save ye."

"My body's free," said the Elder encouragingly. "It's my legs and arms. I went out on the boards."

"What boards?"

"Them they had to get out to the heifer with. I made a misstep. I came down on all fours."

Meantime Luke was trying to locate him from his vantage of firmer ground, and the moon

stayed hidden. But the boards taught him something, and he began walking back and forth, skirting the bog, until his foot struck a fence rail. That was the beginning of the track laid that afternoon. He tried it, feeling his way; where it ended he found another, wider still. "Speak again, can't ye?" he called.

"Here."

"You follered the boards?"

"Yes, and fell off'n the end, either where they stop or where they went under."

Luke set his steps more delicately. The boards had sunken, but so far, he could feel them below the mud.

"Where be ye?"

"Here."

The voice was at his feet, so near that he reached over, groping in the darkness; but he touched only the hateful grass of the bog. Then the moon ran out into an ample field of blue, and he saw the Elder, his body and the back of his white head. The revulsion was too much. "You ain't in the shaker-bed at all, blast ye!" cried he.

"I can't say about that," remarked the Elder into the grass. "This seems to answer the same purpose."

Luke stepped into the mud and felt its

treachery. It did answer the same purpose. But meantime he set both hands under the old man's armpits and lifted. The mud sucked greedily in leaving, and the captive stood upright. But Luke himself was sinking. His teeth were set; the blood surged into his head and seemed to settle there. One after the other he dragged out his imprisoned feet, and floundered back on the boards to rest. The Elder, caked in mud, stood still, as if he chose that footing.

"I believe I am going down very fast," he announced neutrally. "But it is a great privilege to go feet foremost."

Luke went back a couple of yards, and ripped up the boards that were not entirely hidden. He laid them down before the old man, in a rude flooring, and tossed him the rope.

"Put it under your arms," he ordered. "Cast me the ends. I can't git no sort o' purchase on ye, but I'll pull straight ahead. You let your hands come down on them boards, an' crawl like the devil. Push down an' lift yourself out'n the mud. I'll pull."

For a time they strove uselessly. There was a moment when Luke saw that the present unclassified trap was too much for him. He groaned, and at that instant the Elder, his

elbows on the boards, first seemed to move. Luke ventured a step, trying the rails, and because they still gave a foothold he put his hands under the old man's arms, and lifted. Desperate, panting, both of them, he pulled the Elder to his feet, and turned him toward dry land.

"Git along ahead," he gasped. "These boards won't bear two. Gorry! I should think they took down all the fencin'-stuff from here to Ryde. Lucky for you! Git along."

Once the Elder fell, but Luke, without waiting for him to recover himself, set him on his feet again, and, putting a muddy arm about him, urged him on. They struck the damp, coarse grass and climbed the little slope. The Elder was weighted with mud. Even his back carried its own particular plaster, where Luke had touched him. He tried to shake himself, and stooped for a futile scraping with a grimy hand; but Luke only picked up his gun and pushed him onward. They climbed the fence and crossed the field without a word. Opposite the Horner house, Luke stopped again to listen for that sound to which his ears were ever now attuned. Darkness and silence: the baby was asleep. At the Eliots', Elder Kent stretched out his hand and began solemnly, "Under God" — But Luke allowed him no delay.

"Come along up to my place," he commanded. "I'll hoe you off while you hoe me. You don't want to go stirrin' women folks up this time o' night."

The Elder, with a thought of Julia, new to him since he had begun to think of her at all, agreed quite gratefully, and they plodded along the road, all a-light now under the moon. Once on the mountain slope, in the shadow of a pine Luke was never after able to pass without thinking of this moment, he began to laugh. He laughed with all the accumulated hysteria of his former grief. Tears coursed down his muddy face and washed pale channels there. He hooted grotesquely, and the echoes made reply. The Elder paid little heed to that interlude, for he was thinking his own thoughts, and treasuring very sacredly some truths he thought God had shown him in the bog.

"Oh, you old Nebuchadnezzar!" cried Luke, between yells of reminiscence. "Down on all fours, eatin' grass! What ye there for, anyway?"

"They said the heifer was there, hopped. I thought maybe she'd come to some harm, and then I heard her loo. Seemed to me I saw her in the bog. There was a black thing out that way."

"That's the old stump the boys hove in there, three years ago, to show where the bog begun. So you follered out the boards, an' tumbled off, an' the heifer looin' on dry land behind ye! Lucky you floundered 'round face to afore ye sunk. That's the only way I could ha' fetched it."

He set down his gun at the door, and went in to strike a light. The Elder, from prudential reasons, remained outside, looking at the bright heaven, his lips still moving. Luke was building a fire. He set on the wash-boiler, well filled, and when the water was warm, poured it into a tub outside the door, and bade the Elder take his boots off and step in. With the instinct of a primitive yet thorough house-keeper, he thought it simpler to clean man and clothes together. The old man stood quite patiently a-soak, and Luke attacked him with a broom. No horse was ever gentler under currying.

"It's a good thing we don't always have our way," remarked the Elder. "Brother Winthrop, over to Ryde, gave me a new black suit, and very well fitting, too. I told Julia it should go into the missionary box, but nothing would do but I must leave it at Susan Eliot's till we came back some day. She said I should need it in time, and lo ye! I do."

They heated more water, and the Elder discarded the mud-stained garments and left them to dry, while he took a bath and put on Luke's overalls and jumper. Then Evans tubbed in his turn, and in the middle of the night, steaming hot and clean, they sat down outside the door, while one smoked a pipe and the other owned that tobacco had a goodly flavor. Luke went into the house for an extra T D, but the Elder shook his head, though he fingered the smooth bowl abstractedly. It had a pleasant feel. Coffee was boiling on the stove, and the fragrance floated out to them. Luke took his pipe from his lips and turned to the old man.

"When you was stuck there, you called me," said he. "What made you call my name?"

The Elder considered. "I don't know," he said, at last. "I thought of Julia. I knew she'd be put about. Then I thought of you. So I called you."

"Godfrey!" said Luke. For some reason the answer pleased him mightily. He smoked hard till the pipe rattled in its throat. Then he threw it down. "Le's have some coffee."

They drank together, and lay down within, Evans taking his own bed and his guest the kitchen lounge. Luke was at peace, and naturally, he thought, because he was so tired.

His body had fought a good fight and then laughed itself free of inky fears ; so it ran into a rhythm of well-being. He heard the old man murmuring to himself, and smiled scoffingly, yet with tenderness. John Kent "needed a guard-eeen," he thought ; and muttering "Old Nebuchadnezzar !" he was drowsing off to sleep.

"Luke," said the Elder.

"Well, what is it now ?"

"When I thought I had but a few minutes more on earth, God showed me what to do."

"He better ha' showed ye beforehand. Ye need n't ha' got in."

"He told me not to fear, to preach the word as I saw it, and let the seed fall where it would. The words should be put into my mouth" —

"Put into your mouth ! It don't take God A'mighty to tell you what to holler. 'Luke !' you yelled, like a poll-parrot. 'Luke ! Luke !' says you, 'Luke Evans !' "

"And you came," concluded the Elder. "If you were n't sent, why did you come ?"

"Oh, moonshine ! I'm goin' to sleep." But his eyes were set wide open. He lay and thought, and when he heard the Elder's peaceful breathing he smiled a little, and softly called him by unflattering names.

VIII

DAY was dawning on a world all over flame and dew. The mountain-side bloomed purple under vestiges of mist. The fields were rich in heat and light. They had already begun to ripen. Dewdrops lay on the Cumnor pasture, so close that, like gems for a mosaic, they were ready to slide together into a crystal sheen. They were threaded on the pasture grass and bobbing from its blossoms. They clotted on the spiders' webs hung everywhere to dry. Julia was hurrying home along the trail. Every footstep wiped out scores of little water-worlds, each with its spark of sun; but she did not heed.

Her eyes were unseeing, save for the cobwebs. These she noted because they prophesied heat, and she knew there would not be air enough in all the summer world for one sick man to breathe. A white-throated sparrow began from the mountain-side the fine thrill of his overture, never to be continued beyond those first arresting notes. She did not listen.

The pines were austere in green, moved murmuringly by a delicate breath, and the sky, more blue than white, hung sweetly dappled. But Julia held her skirts high and stepped on, wondering if breakfast would be ready. Her vigil had lasted now too long ; she was hollow-eyed yet hawkish, with the look of those at odds with sleep. This last night had been a deadly one of impotent watching, and against her custom she had lurked and suffered until dawn. Then he revived a little, and she heard the doctor predicting one more day.

The Eliot household was up and about, and Susan, seeing her come in, remarked only on the "soppin'" of her feet. It was so common a thing for the Elder to slip away into the dusk, not to be seen until another day, that Susan could tolerate that eccentricity in one of the same blood. Julia, too, might have chosen to seek the spirit on the mountain, and fare homeward through the dew. But Nancy, seeing the ever deepening marks of grief upon her face, followed her upstairs and stood silent while the old woman made herself neat again. Julia shook her head.

"He ain't gone," she said, in a harsh monotone. "He's holding out terribly. I've got to go back."

"I should go back," cried Nancy, taught some things now by an unsatisfied heart. "I should go in."

Julia nodded. She could speak no more, and afterwards sat silent over her food, forcing it down with a sickening distaste. "I'm going over to the Hills'," she said to Susan, when they rose. "Maybe I can do something."

"So do," returned Susan, "if you feel to. I'd ha' gone myself, on'y I thought they'd have so much help. He's holdin' out beyond everything."

It was Nancy who shrank and shivered, for fear some unconsidered speech might rough a wound. Her mother might guess how Julia and Stuart Hill had loved each other in old days, and with the simplicity of the unimaginative mind bring forth some innocent tale connected with the dead. But Julia guessed at no such poor disaster. The unripe blossom of her life had faded so long before, that not a husk was left. She was denied even the inheritance of a common memory shared by those who had known her in her youth. To this little people she was only an old woman offering a gnarled hand to lift an ounce or so in a poor, weighted world. And lately, life itself — all life — had changed. The great things loomed

greater. The little things had sunk away of their own poverty. Even this masquerading in the dusk seemed trivial, for day by day her instinct of hiding had grown dull. She wondered why she had not sought his side before, and then reminded herself how it would have perplexed him, and dizzied his poor brain with futile strivings.

So, with hair put back as smoothly as her locks would ever lie, her decent dress and well-starched apron, she went over to the great house and rang the bell. To the neighbor who met her, old Julia seemed no figure of grief, only a kindly soul with time to spare.

"I thought I'd come over and help 'round," she said, with a simple directness. "I've been over to Susan Eliot's for quite a spell, but everything's done up there now, and we're ahead of the work. There must be room for one more here, having sickness so."

The door opened to her; she was needed. Judge Hill had been "an unconscionable time in dying," and his household had not husbanded its strength. The village nurse was beginning the day with a sick headache, and old Miss Hill, said the neighbor, had "taken assafidity. Miss Hill was beat out. She did n't know how she should get through the forenoon. Perhaps

if Miss Julia 'd sit with the Judge while Miss Hill got a wink o' sleep!"

So the woman led her into the sick-room, where his sister was alone with him. Miss Hill gave her a kindly hand-touch, and then beckoned her to the door where they could talk. "You're real thoughtful," said she. "If I could only get a mite of a nap! Doctor says he may last the day out."

"I'll be glad to stay," said Julia quietly. She dared not look them in the face. The robust joy of her own soul might speak aloud. "I have n't got a thing in the world to do. I'll call you, if there's any need."

And, incredibly beautiful, marvelous beyond all fancy, she was left with her own old love and the fruition of the years. There was nothing to do for him save to be his guard of honor to the gate, where he would meet that potentate known only as a name. Now it seemed futile even to wet his lips. No life was left for cherishing: only the likeness of life. Once his eyelids quivered and lifted slightly, too weak to close. Then she thought how dark it must be to him, with the death-dusk gathering also. They had curtained the windows to a decent gloom. Silently she undid their work and let in all the light of day. Something

else came with it: a gush of the singing of birds. Through that presaging dark, the same notes had been sounding with a shadowy pain. Now they were full and sweet, like bells unmuffled. She took her place again, and closed her fingers softly about his, knowing how the dying hand loves to cling, long as it can, to some palm of earth. Once the neighbor came in, and looked in wonder at the flooding light.

"He wants it so," murmured Julia.

"I don't believe he's conscious," began the woman; but Julia slipped her hand from that poor chilling one, and drew the intruder with her from the room.

"Don't you say a word for him to notice," she commanded, with dignity. "We think they can't hear. How do we know what they hear? Don't you wake anybody up, either. I could sit there till night."

But the old man did not linger. His face grew thin, as if mortality went the way of visible dissolution. It took on an ineffable austerity. His breaths were baby breaths, a whisper in the throat. Now Julia laid her cheek beside his on the pillow, listening and loving. They breathed there together, she in an ecstasy living the life of two, and he—perhaps his spirit waked unseen beside her. The old clock in the

corner rang its eleven strokes, and her heart quickened. It seemed a challenge of time, calling him forth again to earthly hours and days. "Come now," it cried, "or else forever after" —

The last stroke trembled like a thread of sound. The room was very still. Julia knew without assurance that the last act — so great and yet so simple — was accomplished. The knowledge brought a terror and delight: it seemed as if she too, for a moment, had touched that great unchartered freedom of the soul. She lifted her head and looked. He had been motionless before, but now the silence cried aloud of its own potency. It — that ineffable and august being outweighing earth and seas — had withdrawn, and she was alone. She kissed him on the forehead and closed the half-shut lids, and there, in a moment, they found her.

"He's just gone," she said sweetly, smiling at them, — "just gone." Then in the strange confusion attending such departures, she slipped away to the kitchen, and made herself so useful there that she could ill be spared.

So she stayed for the two nights before the funeral, and did all sorts of services, things that made her smile: though not in the least bitterly now, for she was a contented woman, and the

time of her own pilgrimage seemed very short. She made cake, to be eaten at the great funeral supper. She washed pyramids of dishes, for relatives came from the towns about, and there was solemn feasting. And in the silence of the night she slipped into the dark room while the watchers drank their tea, and touched the dead man's hair, and murmured to him.

Judge Hill was a person of consequence, and on the third day men and women in their sober clothes came driving in from all the county round. Julia, standing at the kitchen window, regarded the carriages in a fine worldly satisfaction, and held her head high over his futile triumph. She had no mourning garments, but she brushed her little worn dress, and made herself "as neat as wax." Dust never clung to her, said the country folk, seeing her on her tramps ; she had not forgotten the observances of gentlehood because she lacked the soft security of place. But to-day she tied over her bonnet the figured veil wrought by her mother years and years ago, and always packed with her own traveling gear. That was all she could do to make herself unlike the Julia of the working world.

At two o'clock the mourners assembled in the great parlor about the man they came to

honor. Neighbors and friends were in the sitting-room, and a line of carriages marked out the road imposingly. Almost on the stroke came Elder Kent, himself no less dignified than some who bore the guinea's stamp. Julia, from her window, saw him, and understood. Her heart beat a welcome of such spontaneous love as it had never known in her unwilling servitude. She went forward through the hall to meet him, and he smiled upon her, and took her hand. Then the other minister, the settled one, began : "Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble," and the two old people stood there in the sunlight, clasping hands like children, not of the world about them, yet simple and unabashed. When the neighbors and friends went tiptoeing through, to look once more upon the dead, the two still stood there, cheerful both as the sunshine over them. The halting procession moved along the path, a sluggish stream ; then, the brother still holding his sister's hand, they walked behind the others to the grave. This had been made in the little family lot where all the Hills lay buried ; and Julia looked about her with a wonderful sense of having, after devious ways, come home. "I am the resurrection and the life," read the preacher, and she felt as if that moment might always last. The

benediction came, and silence. Now there would be the sound of clods upon a coffin.

"Let's go," she whispered, and the Elder drew her out of the yard and into the pasture trail. Halfway she said wonderingly, "I don't seem to have any strength!" but when he asked if she would rest, she shook her head and smiled at him.

The house was empty when they got there, for Susan and Aunt Lindy had gone to the funeral, and Nancy was lying out in the field alone. Julia climbed to her little room, and the Elder followed her. He tried to take off her bonnet, and got the strings into a hard knot. Julia laughed a little at that, and untied them. Then she lay down, and he brought a quilt from the closet. It was a hot summer day, but anxious intelligence taught him no other form of ministry. Julia let him spread it to her chin, and waited till he had gone softly down the stairs before she threw it off. Then she lay thinking, in great weariness, but with her happy vision fixed upon the splendor of the soul. She knew she had passed through her great trial unscathed. Not even the strength of her body was really sapped by these nights of vigil and days of bitter retrospect. Once she had given up, foolishly, wastefully perhaps; but God had

not let her suffer that last and keenest pang of withdrawing her beloved in her absence. Her life had blossomed, after all.

The Elder, down on the porch, thinking, thinking, with his ears pricked to hear a sound from her, was tasting, too, the sweetness in a bitter rind. He longed to go back and whisper his new comfort in her ear, telling her that grief had no meaning save as a heavenly medicine. Yet some dissuading wisdom held him still. At his heart he envied her because she suffered universal pain. These were the simple human pangs and glories of the soul, at this one halting-place upon an infinite way — and they were good. They brought her nearer other men by kinship only than he could ever be through prayer and prophecy. Now, almost at the end of life, he saw the face of nature as it shows the face of God, and set dull working days beside eternal Sabbaths, to the infinite enrichment of them both. He began dimly to suspect what loss may lie in foregoing mortal blessedness, even for a loftier joy. Yet since we must tread the way marked out for us, his nature returned upon its old, old track, and he murmured to himself, as he had so long, "My soul hungers and thirsts after the living God." God! was He the unattainable? How should He be attained?

IX

THE Pillcott camp-meeting had gone tumultuously on until the fifth day and the last. All the world turned out from Cumnor, Ryde, and King's End, and there had been great harvesting of souls. Elder Kent, instead of mounting the rude platform as he used to do, stayed humbly among the impenitent, and Luke stayed with him. It seemed to the preacher as if he had a child under his charge, and, with some intuition of Luke's dependence on him, he dared not ignore it, lest the outcast slip away discouraged, and defer his soul's salvation. For though the old man preached no longer as these, his chosen people of other years, were bound to preach, he looked upon them with a wistful faith. They had no medicine for him, but they had, he knew, for many, and Luke might be among them. The smoking flax must not be quenched. He would utter his word in season, but meantime others should say theirs. He had a pathetic care of Julia, too. She was busy everywhere. People went to her for all sorts of things, from

coffee-making to the loan of a pin. In her brief idleness she sat within the shade, far from the sound of prayer, a look of sweet absorption on her face. At such times, the Elder would seek her out, and ask wistfully, —

“You feeling pretty well?”

She always smiled at him and answered, “Real well. I’m real contented, too.”

These were hot days, and the woods exhaled a resinous sweetness suffocating in the nostrils. Certain of the more distant towns had put up tents, and carried on a primitive camping. Scattered through the clearing at the south were smaller tents, erected by families, and day by day, those who lived near enough, came with their luncheon baskets and “hitched hosses” at a distance. The ground itself lay like a natural amphitheatre. There the rude seats had been built and, fronting them, the platform for exhorters. On this last day, the air was charged with a disturbance even more palpable than that of nature. Nerves had been woefully strained in the annual onslaught upon sin. Renewed souls were exhausted from the force of their own battling, and even the saved of a previous conversion grew fractious under the necessity of “being religious,” the while they packed in preparation for going home.

Luke, lingering near the Cumnor tent, waiting for the Elder to leave a band of black-coated colleagues, frowned at the voices of women floating out upon the air. He caught his own name and a fragment of his own story, elementary as the record of the world must ever be when it spells the alphabet of hearts.

"Big Joan won't tell how 't was nor Sally herself. As for Obed, you can't git it out o' him. But all is, he gi'n the baby up because she was teethin', an' he thought her grandmother could do for her. An' here he is. On the anxious seat last night. Didn't you see him? They kep' at him till nigh twelve o'clock, an' he never yipped."

"Well, how *is* the baby?"

"Oh, the baby's all right! Teeth come terrible early, an' she's been real sick; but Mis' Horner's as pleased as a cat with two tails. Now think o' Sally Horner herself, 'round the house ag'in as large as life an' twice as nippin'! Big Joan 'll have to carry less sail."

"Well, I guess she won't. Nothin' less 'n an earthquake 'll shake up Joan."

"I dunno. Sally's a whole team, on'y git her started. Think of all that time she's laid there! I guess she'll be madder 'n a hornet when she comes to add it up. All the doctors'

trade she's took, too! My soul, if I'd thought this cheese would n't ha' been eat, I never'd ha' brought it."

Then the Elder appeared, and Luke turned with him into a balmy path leading to a spring they both knew well. Luke took off his hat and pushed the hair back from his forehead. His face was ivory pale, and his eyes kept a suspicious outlook upon life. "I don't care a damn what becomes of me," he said.

"God cares," returned the Elder, with simplicity.

"God! Who is He?"

"I don't know."

"What's all this about Jesus Christ? Do you believe it?"

"Oh yes! I believe."

"You believe you'll go to hell if you don't say you believe?"

"I believe I shall be in hell always, till I turn my face towards God."

"How?"

"Keep saying to Him, 'Make me do what You want me to do.'"

They sat down by the spring, and Luke took the cocoanut dipper and drank deep draughts. He looked up at the burning sky. Great piles of thunderheads filled the west, and their pre-

monition beset the air. He hated the world and the way it was made. "I'm in hell now," said he.

A shadow of pain crossed the Elder's face. He longed for the exquisite agony of human loss, that he might also guess where the root of healing grew. Was it in the one Christ alone? Was it not in every soul who chooses to tread the sacred way of pain?

"I guess you are in hell," he said. "But you won't be there a minute longer than God wants you should. I wouldn't pray to come out. I should pray God to tell me what He wants me to do while I'm there."

Luke rolled over, his face in the grass, lying not abased but suppliant before the One who had not yet made his vision clear. Sometimes, an old habit of his misery, he clutched the grass in his hand, and the odor of pennyroyal tinged the air. Once the Elder would have lifted his own voice in ardent supplication; now the travail of souls had grown too sacred, and he dared not stir the waters by a word. He had begun to learn the alphabet of the great patience underlying our small course of the universal plan. Nature, his nurse, had been teaching it to him from the beginning, and only now had he unstopped his ears to her. She,

the great spendthrift, the magnificent, riots in wastefulness. She would as eagerly destroy as make, but only because she is really making. A seed is planted. It dies. Another falls, and that dies also. A third, a fourth, and still the flower may be years in coming. That, thought the Elder, was because his master, God, had time. He, the servant, would work in that same way; he would rest him in the recognition of eternity.

The day beat on, like a heavy pulse. It was all heat, heat, and a threatening moisture that beset the brain. Luke lay supine under its mantle, and the Elder watched beside him. The shadows lengthened, and their vigil lasted. Then Luke spoke raspingly:—

“Are you ever afraid?”

“Yes,” said the old man, lifting his face to heaven, “I am afraid of God.”

“Ain’t you ashamed of it?”

“No.”

“Not after all this rubbish about love?”

“It’s all one. It’s the same fire that cooks your breakfast and burns you when you break a law. It’s all one.”

A girl on the camp-ground began singing “Happy Day,” and a chorus of young voices joined her. They turned the hymn into a

dryad's pæan. They seemed to be quiring, not the great abnegation, but some new-found spring of love and youth. Luke pointed, with a shaking hand.

"Happy Day!" he repeated, like a curse. "I s'pose you 're happy, too?"

"No," said the Elder simply, "I should n't call it that."

"O ho! but you 'd tell me I 'd be, if I made myself into a tomfool like the rest on ye."

The Elder felt the puzzle of life as it concerns the soul and body, two warring creatures forced to run in double gear.

"Folks are happy different ways," he said. "Sometimes it's one way when we think it's another. When we're young — when we've got the folks we set by — why, then 'most anything makes us see some kind of heaven. But I guess we don't very often get there — to stay. I should n't think much about that, if I was you. I don't. It only makes us hungry — that kind of hungry that never does any good."

"You talk about the love of God. Is that love? To make you hungry, and give you nothin' — nothin'" — He clutched the grass again, and bruised his fingers on the earth. He seemed to be grasping at primal life: entreating his way savagely back into the earth, to escape the pain of growing.

"You see," went on the Elder gently, "He had to give us some kinds of hunger that don't amount to anything in the end. You've got to eat, or you could n't live. But what difference will it make to you when you're a free spirit whether you've had beefsteak this day? The world has got to be carried on. Men have got to crave for women and women for men, as if they were the end and aim of all — and suffer hell pains to give 'em up. But it's all one, all one — the love of God."

"I don't want God," gasped the man in one great confession. "I want" — Then he shut his lips and set them to the earth.

The Elder laid one close hand on his. Now he spoke passionately, because this at least he knew. "Give up," he commanded. "Whatever it is, give up. Give up everything but God. Follow after Him. The love of God! Ask Him for it, day and night, night and day. Live a thousand lives and die a thousand deaths hunting for it. Love of father and mother, wife and child, what are they but the love of God? Give yourself up to Him. Say every time you breathe, 'Lord, tell me what to do.'"

Luke said no word. He moved his cheek to a cooler spot in the kind grass, and buried it deeper there. The twilight came, and then the

dusk. He slept a little, and the Elder waited. They rose together, and went back to the grounds, where Julia met them with food. She glanced at them and smiled. For the Elder looked as if something very good had happened, and Luke was somehow altered, as if his fetters had fallen away. No new spirit can be hidden, veil it as we will by diffidence or reserve. A little more humility, a vowed obedience, and we are changed.

That late afternoon Martin, whose mind was not on prayer-meetings, met Alla in the entry as she went upstairs. Her eyes had been wet all day without his noticing. Now, therefore, they were reddened anew by artifice.

"Hullo!" said he, and would have passed her, but she stretched a detaining hand.

"It won't be 'hullo' much longer," said she. "Your mother's told me something. She's going to clean house, and she wants my room—to-morrow." Her eyes implored him, also her grieving tone. Had he influence in his own house? they asked. Would he give her leave to stay?

"Cleaning!" said Martin, betraying his surprise. "In the middle of summer?"

"She says so."

Mrs. Jeffries came out from the sitting-room, her trumpet ready. She fixed it to her ear and lifted the mouthpiece insinuatingly toward Martin. "Did you holler?" she asked blandly. "Was you wantin' to speak to me?"

Martin looked her in the eye with a gaze compact of admiration. He shook his head. "Ride over to camp-meeting with me to-night," said he in a hasty aside to Alla. "It's my last chance." The words escaped him. They were meant for his own mind, not for hers; but they covered her with a radiance of hope fulfilled. Even the jealous old woman saw that, and stepped between.

"What did you say, Martin?" she asked, still with a deceptive allurement.

"Half past five," said Martin under his breath. "That'll be early enough."

Alla ran upstairs, light of foot under the burden of her happiness, and Martin put his lips to the trumpet. "Mother," said he approvingly, "you're the devil and all."

Mrs. Jeffries nodded in well-satisfied commendation of so just a sentiment. "I ain't a fool by any manner o' means," she announced modestly. "She's goin'. She tell ye?"

"Yes. Said you'd got to have her room."

"It's better'n her company," chuckled the

old lady, looking at him knowingly, with her head on one side. "Then you turn over a new leaf. You lay aside your profligate ways, an' go over an' ask Nancy Eliot to marry ye. As good a girl as ever stepped, an' here you be carryin' on like a crazed creatur'. I'd like to know what your father'd say!" She withdrew the trumpet, and went composedly about her work, leaving him to muse.

He went out of doors, smiling to himself and lifting his brows over the complications of the afternoon. For his mother was watching, and he knew it. The indomitable old lady would keep her eye on him until Alla should be gone. She was even capable of climbing into the wagon, accoutred as she was, and driving with them to camp-meeting, a righteous marplot. So Martin kept out of the way. At five, he had a "cold bite" in the pantry, and then disappeared into his own room, where he shaved. By and by, he slipped out to the barn, groomed Black Fancy, and harnessed her ready for the carriage. His mother was picking up chips when he strode past her, with a nod and smile meaning there was merry war between them. Mrs. Jeffries ignored the nod; she shook her head, and continued to shake it long after she had seen him lounge out into the road and set off in the

direction of the new house. But Martin only walked until the fringed roadside hid him from view; then he leaped the wall and came home over the field. His mother was not visible; he judged, and rightly, that she had gone to put on her more sacred cap and apron for the afternoon. So he tapped at Alla's door.

"Ready?" he asked. "Go out and wait in the barn. Fancy's pretty high this afternoon. I'd rather you'd get in there."

She called her assent eagerly, understanding what he failed to explain. It was not Fancy who was high.

When Martin, in the splendor of his best clothes, went into the barn, Alla was there, trembling and pretty. It took only an instant to back Fancy into the shafts, put the girl into the buggy, and, opening the great doors, leap in beside her. They were driving swiftly out of the yard, grazing a short curve, when the expected happened. Mrs. Jeffries, bonnet in hand, appeared on the steps and called shrilly after them: "Martin, Martin, you stop! You take me, too!"

Martin drove on, without turning his head. Alla gave a little nervous laugh, but when she looked at him his face was set immovably, and she wondered if he could have heard. For the

first mile he said nothing, and she was too happy to talk. He had taken her side, said feminine instinct. She had been forbidden the house, but it made no difference. The new one was almost ready. A word to-day and it would be settled. She was already his, and he had only to speak to make her so indeed.

"We 'll get supper up in the Cumnor tent," he said, at last. "They 'll have buns and truck."

"I don't care," said Alla, wishing she dared nestle closer to him, but always repelled by that strange aloofness. "I don't care 'f I never eat." She laughed again in a wild exhilaration. She was like a shepherd lass who had heard all her life of the mountain god; and lo! a summer day and the god was here beside her. Why should he seek her, unless he wanted her? Desire and the full cup were on their way to meet.

Martin, too, was under the spell of a nervous tension. He thought with lightning speed, and tried vainly to formulate what he had to do. It must come as it would. All he could be sure of was that he must see her absolutely alone before she went away; so far, he was succeeding.

When they drove into the grounds, the turmoil of supper was going on, and Alla, under

the focus of eyes, carried herself like a village queen. She knew what they were thinking. She could almost echo those unheard voices. Martin Jeffries had got through with that wild-goose chase after Nancy Eliot, she heard them say; he had taken up with Alla Mixon. Good for him! She felt already like a bride, and stood demurely by as he fastened the horse. Then she walked beside him to the tent and talked soberly with matrons over their picnic supper. When the services began — early that night, because there must be time for a final winnowing of chaff and wheat — she and Martin sat down in the outer row of seats.

“We can slip away if we want to,” he whispered her, and she nodded, with burning cheeks. She thought he would propose going soon, perhaps by the Old Gristmill Road. The moon would be up, and in that silvered seclusion they could talk and talk. She almost felt his lips on hers, and sighed.

The meeting began, and the great exhorter called upon Christians to rise and then upon the sinners. At each summons, Alla gave a frightened look at Martin; but seeing him un-stirred, she sank back, half-heartedly relieved. The exhorter was a giant, of an imposing presence. His black hair swept back from his

forehead, his eyes burned in the lantern light, and his voice rang superbly through the echoing wood.

"Come to the mercy seat!" he chanted. "Come! Come! Every one! Every one! Young men and maidens, come, or it will be too late! too late!"

Tremulous forms rose in the darkness and stole down to the anxious seat. Sobs were in the air, and at every movement the exhorter cried, "Glory to God! Glory to God!"

Elder Kent, standing by the platform with Luke, like a darker shadow, had folded his arms and lifted a peaceful face to heaven. But when these cries arose, he too murmured adoringly, "Glory to God!"

The night was suffocatingly still. Women waved their palm-leaf fans, and even in that outer air, two or three were led, faint and breathless, to the spring. There was a rumbling of thunder from the west, and slow, rosy flashes of lightning lit the whole heaven, disclosing fear, repentance, and a vague uneasiness on scores of upturned faces. Even with Martin, Alla was afraid. She could hardly breathe. Little sobs arose in her throat, and she choked them, fearing his derision. The lightning came more regularly now, disclosing the black-

ness of the cloud-pall overhead. Underneath the exhorter's frenzy, there was a murmur of secular talk. Men consulted together, and wondered whether it would be well to wait till the storm broke, or to be on the homeward way. Some of them drew their women folk aside, and there was a noise of rustling skirts and, from the tents, a sound of packing. The commonplace tumult surged about Alla like a premonitory warning. With these words of death and judgment in her ear, it seemed like the end of the world; her only stay was Martin, and he made no move to still her tremors.

"I guess we'd better get out of this," he said at last, when the flashes gave place to a zigzag streak and a nearer peal. "What do you think?"

"Oh, let's go home!" she cried, beside herself. "I'm afraid — the thunder and all these folks."

She took his arm and hurried with him to the tree where Fancy had been tethered. The horse whinnied gladly and laid her nose to Martin's shoulder. Her eyes showed her feelings; her ears were flat. She was young, and she, too, hated thunder. They drove cautiously over the rough wood road, and then out on the highway at a quickened pace. Fancy knew it

all. The storm was coming, and she was to let it chase and never overtake her. Martin, driving carefully, his eyes on the road and every sense alert, had his mind on the quest for which he had come. The shower might balk him.

"Alla," said he, "see here! You've got to tell me something."

Her fears settled themselves like magic. This was the moment of her life. She looked blissfully into the storm, and smiled.

"Yes," she said, her voice all sweetness.

A sharper gleam struck them in the face. Fancy rose on her hind legs, and bolted. Martin set his hands to the reins, and pulled her into her swift, considered trot. He spoke between clenched teeth, managing, as he was, both horse and woman. "When you took my 'Pilgrim's Progress,' what did you do with that pressed flower in it?"

Thrown from her base of expectation, Alla gasped and clenched her hands. Was he insane, or had she heard him wrongly? It seemed a part of the storm. Anything was possible on a night like this. "I never" — she began, but he stopped her.

"You went into my room and took down my 'Pilgrim's Progress.' You've got the paper the flower was in. Where is the flower?"

The storm was on them with announcing splashes, and then the driving volley of the rain. The thunder broke in cracks; the lightning blinded them. Martin gave up argument, for the horse forgot she had a master, and the next moment might see them in the ditch. With a sharp turn that wrung a little cry from Alla, he dipped into a yard and drove up to a barn, where he called and then waited for some one to come.

Old Uncle Simeon Beane potted out of the house with a lantern, and began struggling with the door. "I've expected some on ye for the last half an hour," he panted. "I says to her, some o' them camp-meetin' folks 'll be sure to drive in. Gosh! ain't that a high hoss!"

Fancy stood on her hind legs again, and pawed at the barn.

"I'd give you a hand, only I don't like to leave her," said Martin; but the old man had at last conquered the latch, and the wind was helping them. The door swung open.

They drove in, and the horse stood dripping and quivering, her nostrils big with fright. Alla had longed for shelter, but these hay-lined walls presaged a darker doom. If she must be struck, it might better be in the open. But if Martin would only be kind to her — she choked a little,

and felt her fear. Old Simeon, clinging for dear life to the barn door, had shut and hooked it. He was a thin shaving of a man, with a tuft of beard and a memory of eyes. They seemed to have withdrawn into their sockets, to keep the keener watch. He lifted his lantern, and gazed admiringly at Fancy.

"That 's a pretty fair hoss," he remarked; but upon the heels of his speech came flash and roar, and he fell into the limpness of the summoned. "God sakes!" he cried, "le's not have no worldly talk. We're in the power of the Almighty." He withdrew into the tie-up, where darkness invited him, leaving the lantern behind, and began a sepulchral counting. Martin stepped down, and stood by Fancy's head.

"What's that old pirate counting for?" he asked Alla, and she returned, shuddering:—

"To tell whether the thunder gets farther off. Gran'ther used to."

Martin stroked the horse's neck, and seemed to be thinking. Alla could not look at him. Suddenly she was afraid of him, more, even, than of the storm. He was so terribly remote. The barn had been packed with new hay, some of it brought in that afternoon; it was from the lowland and thick with spearmint. The air reeked with the fragrance. She hated it

because it seemed a part of this hideous time. Martin left the horse, and came nearer. His gaze compelled her eyes. "Alla," he said, "where's that flower, that ladies'-delight?"

Her lips whitened, but she did not answer. Invention failed her.

"Seven — eight — nine," came weirdly from the darkness, and with the peal, began again at one.

"You might as well tell me," said Martin. "You see I know the whole story. You took down my 'Pilgrim's Progress.' You found a folded paper in it, and the paper had a flower pressing. I know, because that paper was the note you told Nancy Eliot she'd got to pay."

Alla looked at him, fascinated; this was not the way discovery should come. He was not blaming her about the note; he only talked of flowers.

"Did you throw the flower away?" asked Martin.

"I guess I — lost it," she answered, almost inaudibly.

He smiled, and catching the flash of that concession, she breathed again.

"That's all right," he said. "So the flower was there. And the paper 't was in was the note."

She was constrained to answer, "Yes."

He came a little nearer, and laid his hand upon the wheel. "Alla," said he, "have you made way with that other note?"

In spite of herself, she shook her head. His masterful spirit and the terrors of the world without were both constraining her.

"Then," said Martin, still gently, "I'll tell you what you've got to do. You've got to show me both notes together, and let me tell you how to keep out of Pillcott Jail. It won't help you to destroy either one now. You've got to let me manage it."

Her teeth were chattering, and she cowered into her shawl. Was he a malignant spirit, or was he kind? Old Simeon appeared from the shadow moderately cheerful, for the thunder was rumbling away, and the last flashes had scarcely penetrated his retreat.

"About that hoss, now," he began, but Martin had opened the door and was backing out, calling, as he took his place: "Much obliged! Do the same for you, come Judgment Day!"

Fancy's hoofs went beating down the muddy road, and the old man chuckled to himself, as he latched the door and went in to bed.

Martin drove swiftly and without a word. When they entered the yard, the moon was

shining, and the clouds, withdrawing, left the world all light. Mrs. Jeffries' lamp was burning, and Martin knew she was watching for him to drive into the barn. He stopped at the gate, and going back to the carriage, held out his hands. Alla stepped down trembling, and stood beside him on the soaking grass. She was sick with the dread of him and her own accomplished deed.

"Go into the house," said Martin steadily, "and get both notes. Bring 'em out into the barn. Come to the cow-house door. I'll be there. I'll fix it for you, Alla. It's that or jail."

Still she did not know whether he was kind or only threatening her to her own betrayal. No matter: languor fell upon her, and she went weakly up the path. At the steps, she heard him coming. Silently he pushed open the door and groped his way behind her up the stairs. In his own room, he lighted a candle and carried it in, to find her trying, with shaking hands, to take off her wet shawl. He helped her gently, and she looked up at him with an imploring patience.

"Come, Alla," said he, "get the notes."

"There's only one," she faltered weakly.

"Oh yes! there's two, at present. If there

is n't, you've destroyed the old one, and that means jail. Find the notes."

She opened the bureau drawer, and took out her father's wallet. It was stuffed with papers. Defiantly she selected one and gave it to him. "That's all there is," she said sullenly, combating her fear.

A step sounded in the sitting-room below; then an intermittent whirring told that Mrs. Jeffries had begun to wind the clock.

"There's mother," said Martin. "Out with the candle. We've got to finish this, now we've begun."

He blew out the light, and they stood silent while Mrs. Jeffries came halfway up the stairs, sniffing at the smoke. Then they heard her retreat to the kitchen, on some forgotten quest. Martin threw up the window, tossed out the telltale candle, and whispered, —

"Come, you've got to talk with me."

He grasped her wrist, and drew her down the stairs, out over the wet grass to the barn. She would have resisted him, save for her ignorance of his desires toward her. Was he working for Nancy? She would have held to her point, defying him and the law. Was he working for her? She could deny him nothing. He led her through the door into the cow house, and left her

there in darkness while he lighted the lantern. She could hear the cows chewing their cuds in the yard without, and the drip, drip of water from the eaves. She hated the country now, as she had been used to hate it in the old days, before she went away and fell in love with city streets. Martin came toward her with the lantern, illuminating a step before him and carving the shadows into caverns blacker still. His face wore a fictitious sternness because, little as she might know it, he was not yet out of the woods of doubt. He brought forward a keg, and turned it over.

"Sit down," he said. "Alla, where's that note?" He had the new one in his pocket. She had seen him put it there.

"You've got it," she said doggedly.

"I've got the copy. Where is the old note, with your father's writing on the back?"

She put her head on one side and bridled a little, with a pathetic recurrence to her idea of feminine charm. "I wish you would n't plague me so," she pouted. "When I'm sleepy, too!"

"I shall have to be a witness," said Martin inexorably. "When I'm asked, I shall have to own you went into my room, took down my book, and stole this note out of it. The note

was one Nancy wrote in the schoolhouse one day, to carry up to your father. She thought it did n't look well enough, and so she copied it, and I took this and slipped it into my book, to press a flower. I can't tell what you did with the other, but I shall have to prove you stole this. Come, Alla, own up, and it's between you and me so long as we both shall live."

He spoke solemnly, and the words hurt her with their echo of unending troth.

"What do you want to know for?" she asked sharply, from the acuteness of her pain.

Then Martin hedged, and was wholesomely ashamed. "I don't want to think you're a thief."

Her eyes were upon him, trying to read his mind. He could see her poise and counterpoise, but he never knew how despairingly. Her terrible human stake lay quite outside his line of vision. He knew she sought him, coquetted with him; but knowing also how shallow she was, he never called that pastime love. Her face whitened. She had decided. On the one hand was certain loss, and on the other a little less despair. She would yield, and then he must reward her. Rising, she put her hand into the inner pocket of her petticoat, brought

forth a slip of paper, and held it toward him, looking up at him with anguished eyes. "There!" she breathed.

Martin took it, and turned it from one side to the other. "That's the ticket!" said he gladly. "Twenty, thirty, thirty — there'll be a matter of interest, a few cents." He took out his pocket pen — one he had bought Nancy and offered her in vain — and figured rapidly on the spurious note. "That's how I make it," he said, "to date. That suit you?"

She nodded, waiting for him to thrust aside the hateful business and turn to what concerned themselves. Martin drew out his disreputable wallet, fat with bills, perhaps prepared for this encounter. Selecting two, he laid them in her lap. "Look it over," said he briskly. "That all right? Now put your name here. Easy with the pen. Sometimes it splutters."

Alla wrote unseeingly. Her careless letters straggled down the page. Then she passed him pen and paper with a trembling hand, and waited. Martin, smiling, blew upon the signature.

"That's over," he said cheerfully. "You're all right, Alla. I would n't do that kind of thing again, though. If you monkey with business, you'll get left. Now run in and put on dry clothes. I'll hold the lantern."

She looked at him fiercely. "Is that all?" she cried.

"I guess so. We don't want to rake up anything more about it, do we?"

"Is it all?" she repeated. She tried to summon a just indignation and was conscious only of being cold. "Martin Jeffries, is that why you've been going with me?"

Martin had made the mistake of ignoring emotion in her because she ignored it in some one else. Yet human things are not to be dealt with thus, and the unjust soul may awaken, and cry in its turn for justice. But still he thought only of Nancy, and after Nancy, himself. Alla seemed a subordinate character, made to be put aside, now that her part was played.

"Going with you?" he repeated honestly. "Bless your soul! Don't get such a bee as that into your bonnet. Oh, Alla, come, be a good girl! Run in now, and get on some dry clothes."

She rose and slipped away into the dark. At the door he thought he heard a sob, and called her name; but though he ran after her, careless of his mother's eyes, she was gone and in her own room. It seemed to him a bad business well over, and he led Black Fancy into the yard and whistled as he unharnessed. His mother

set the lamp in the window to throw a track of light, and when he went in she met him at the door. Her face challenged him.

"Martin," said she, quite humbly, offering her trumpet, "you ain't up to anything you could n't let your father know, now be you?"

He was about to put her jeeringly off, according to their mutual habit of play; but suddenly he became aware that this was not tyranny calling from her eyes. It was a quivering apprehension. He spoke gently into the tube: "Now, mother, you just treat me once as if I was a white man! I'm as good as you are."

The little old lady sighed. "You ain't got anyways tangled up with that creatur'?" she insisted.

"I just took her to ride. I had to, did n't I, to plague you, after you'd been cross to her? Now, mother, you be a decent old lady, and I'll have Nancy writing her name with a J before Thanksgiving."

Her face softened a little, and she smiled, with some return of her general defiance of destiny. "Then le's get to bed," said she, "an' be up time enough to pack off that creatur' up there. She said she'd go by the fust train."

Martin detained her, to plead. "Mother, now you act nice to her in the morning. I've been

as hateful as a hog. She's all out of conceit with me."

In that event, said Mrs. Jeffries' answering glint of smile, amiability might be managed. "I'll have cream-o'-tartar biscuits for breakfast," she promised.

Martin saw her up the stairs to her room, and threw off his wet coat for a dry one. He stayed only to change the contents of the inner pocket, and then strode out of the house, shutting the door behind him. He knew Nancy was not at camp-meeting, for Aunt Lindy and Mrs. Eliot were there with the Kanes. It might not be too late to find her. There was no light, but he tried the door, and then stepped into the dusky entry, whence he knew his way. "Nancy!" he called softly, with some presentiment.

"Oh, Martin! Martin!" answered a sobbing voice on the heels of his speech. "You there? Oh, Martin, is that you?"

He felt along through the darkness with hands outstretched, and hearing the catch of her breath, touched the soft shawl about her shoulders. She stood still, her pulsating blood betraying her, and when he drew her into his arms she clung there, and, like a child, curled her head into his coat. He could feel her

breath, and his own, hot and fast, met and mingled with it.

"Oh, Nancy, don't speak!" he whispered, "give me your mouth." But while they stood there, he guessed how she was yielding, until only his arms upheld her. She seemed pathetically weak for the girl who had so flouted him. Was it she, or another made in her image, yet all sweetness? He did not care. She seemed to him not so much the one he had loved and striven for, as all womankind made to draw the primal man in him eternally. But because she was so weak, he put out his hand and found the corner of the sofa where she had been lying, and so guided her to it. They sat down together, his arms again about her. Then she spoke, but with a recklessness new to her pure voice.

"Martin, I can kiss you to-night, for it's the last time—the first and the last. I've committed the unpardonable sin."

He laughed and stroked her cheek. "Good for you, Nancy! Now you can tell 'em what it is."

She only shuddered. "I'm lost," she said quite softly, but with her teeth chattering. "So it don't make any difference what I do. I know you're going with another girl, but I don't

even care for that, so long 's you're here this minute."

"Stuff and nonsense! there's no other girl. Because I took Alla Mixon to ride, to get a chance to see her alone and talk about your note? You little fool! you know every drop of blood in me is yours, just as yours belongs to me. If we could have our blood turned into each other's veins, we should n't know the difference, should we? You tell."

"No! no!"

But Martin really loved her, for tenderness constrained him to be gentle. He touched her cheek again, and made his voice all kindness: "Tell about it."

"I've committed the unpardonable sin," she repeated monotonously. "I've upset my life every way. Somehow or other, I got cheated out of all the money I worked for, — the money mother ought to have. I was n't fit to do business. Then I went up there to Luke's, and got myself talked about. Aunt Lindy let that out to-day."

"What's the value of their talk? — a last year's bird's nest."

"Did you hear it?"

"Some of it, yes."

"Did you think I was — bad?"

He fancied her eyes darkening in pain.

"I thought exactly what everybody else did! I thought you were a little fool. I did n't like your cutting round over the pastures at night, so I used to follow on, to see you come out right."

"I heard the steps. I thought it was spirits. Was it you?"

"Me. Spirit of a just man made perfect."

"Did you follow me the night I walked up the road with him?"

"Till he tried to kiss you. Then I thought — if you liked it, he might." Some reserve of a pain she had not suspected moved the lightness of his voice, and, jealous for him, she retorted sharply, —

"He did n't kiss me."

"No. I saw you bowl him over. I said, 'She's my Nancy yet. I can trust her.' So I went along home."

Something prompted her to probe him further. "Suppose I had liked him?"

"Then," said Martin, "I should have known I'd got to wait for you till you got over your craze and came back."

"How long?"

"Maybe a year. Maybe — till the sun cools off."

But Nancy shivered back to her grief. "I have committed the unpardonable sin," she repeated.

"That's all right. Just like you, too! You would n't be contented with arson or murder; no makeshifts for a girl like you!"

"I promised God to give up everything and preach the gospel. Then I saw you go by to camp-meeting with her. I'd seen you with her before, but to-night I could n't bear it. I sent word to the Elder that I would n't go away with them, and I sat here all the evening and talked to God. I told Him I had just one thing besides mother, and He'd taken it away. I did n't mind the money's going, but you — you!" — She clung to him agonized, with a sharp and sudden understanding of what it is to be bereft.

"Oh, my soul and body!" groaned Martin. "When it comes to living on this earth, not one of you women is knee-high to a grasshopper. What do you suppose God cares about your squeaking little back talk? You just come over to the new house, along in the fall, and wash dishes and cook johnny-cake, like any other married woman, and be kissed for your pains, and see if God interferes with you. More or less He will. We've got to tough it with the rest. Even squirrels have hard winters. But

what do you suppose He put us here for, but to mate, and clear up the ground a little, and sow a few grass-seeds, and plant a tree? We ain't — *are not* here to be forever packing to go somewheres else. If God is the kind of a county sheriff you seem to think, He must get terrible tired of seeing folks 'round with their white robes on, and their harps standing ready, tied up in green baize."

"I tell you I'm lost. I have a sense of sin."

"Sense of sin! sense of fiddlestick! You're tired out. You've kept school and revamped the universe till you're off your head. King's End's too bracing, anyway. Father used to say so. That's why we're all more or less lunny. I made up my mind when I used to see you whipping by to school, with your eyes starting out of your head, that, when we were married, we'd go to the sea every summer, and camp out. Yes, ma'am! Oh, Nancy, girl, don't waste this first minute talking about sin. Think how the sage and marjoram will smell when you come out between the rows to call me to dinner, and your skirts brush against 'em. And in the winter, when you have a sore throat, I'll tie it up in pork and petticoats!"

And lo! since he was a man and the man she loved, all her cares fell away from her. His

rude vigor seemed the only real thing on earth ; and because the earth belonged to him, it was hers also, and dear to her.

“ Could I, do you think,” she asked, with a timidity he found adorable, — “ could I let myself live along like that ? But if I did, Martin, if I did it ever, I should have to pay off that money first, so ’s mother ’d be provided for.”

“ ‘ Come, rise up, William Reilly,’ ” quoted Martin. “ Let ’s have a light.”

He never forgot that first glimpse of her illumined by the little lamp. Her lips a-quiver over the white teeth, her eyes all sweet and shining, she looked as if she had risen from a bath of happiness. The other prim Nancy had gone. This seemed her younger sister, the child of youth and love, spelling out the first letters of the sweetness of earth. The picture came back to him that night when he lay in his little dark room, and he knew then that he had it forever. But at the moment when his eyes recorded it, he was not conscious of her looks at all : only that he had something which would please her very much. He took out the missing note, and presented it, with his dancing-school bow.

“ There, Miss Nancy ! ” said he. “ Compliments of the season.”

She took it, first indifferently, and then in an unbelieving joy. Her fingers shook. "Oh, Martin!" she cried, "Oh, Martin! you tell me where you got it!"

Martin was, as he owned to himself afterwards, stumped. All the address of man is powerless, he saw, before an inquiring woman. He may do deeds for her; but it is a marvel if he can unriddle how he did them. But his was a blithe and dauntless wit. He took her hands, and the note fluttered down between them, Nancy eyeing it hard, afraid of further witchery.

"Nancy, dear," said he, "Alla happened to find the first draft you wrote there in the schoolhouse that day. I slipped it into my book, to press the flower in. Don't you know I asked you about the flower? Well, you see I'd lost it; and Alla, she'd borrowed my book, and the paper — sort o' fell out and she found it. And then she came across the other, the right one, — and she was afraid to tell. I knew there was something on her mind, so I took her to ride to get chances to see her, and mother not know, — though somehow I never could get anywhere till to-night. She's all broke up about it, Nancy. You won't speak of it? Not to her, not to anybody, ever?" He drew a long breath.

"I guess I won't, if you tell me not to!"

She looked at him from that new plane of submission, and her humility went to his head.

He put his hands on her shoulders, though the Kanes' old wagon, with its three loose spokes, had rattled up to the gate, and he knew Aunt Lindy was probably beginning her difficult descent. Martin regarded his girl with eyes so compelling that she felt her first doubt whether she had ever known him in the least. "Nancy! Nancy! what do you suppose is going to happen?"

She shook her head.

"You're going to turn to me the same way you've done everything else. You're going to breathe my breath, think my thoughts, make a little god out of me. I know you. Lord! have n't I got my hands full!"

She looked at him, wistfully and still uncomprehending. "Don't I care about you the way you want?" she asked timidly. "Do I set by you too much?"

He could not answer her, and she felt him trembling through his strength. He knew it would be years before she really learned what love is like. Mrs. Eliot's hand was on the latch, and Nancy, with sudden panic, drew him round the other way.

"Go out the back door," she whispered.

“Don’t let mother see you. I’ll run up to bed and think. I shan’t sleep. Oh, Martin, I never was happy in my life!”

It was a wonderful thing to bid her good-by while the cup was still but tasted. He ran back as she was closing the door between them, and she put out her hands, an involuntary welcome.

“Remember,” he said, “you’re as much my girl to-morrow as you are to-night. When I come, you’re going to meet me, and kiss me good-morning before them both.”

And Nancy knew in her heart she should.

X

AT five o'clock in the morning, all Sally Horner's doors and windows lay open to the sun. She had now small conceit of her bed ; perhaps she even feared it a little lest, lying a moment too long, that old paralysis of the will should fall upon her.

The cradle stood there in its old place, and the baby slept the sleep of one to whom teething is less than a memory. Sally Horner, on her way to the bedroom to hang up her alpaca, threw the child, in passing, a glance of that fierce tenderness which betrayed her as she was. A step sounded on the walk and at the door. It neared, with a growing caution, and Luke Evans, his stick and little bundle over his shoulder, came softly in. Sally Horner, from the bedroom, peered round the casing and watched him. He seemed to her now three quarters man, and not all beast, as her angry spirit had once declared him ; and, being on her feet, she felt capable of war, tooth and nail, should he lay hand upon the child. He cast a glance about

him, and then made for the one significant spot in the room, — the cradle. There he stood so still that the clock's ticking seemed too loud, and a bee outside the window boomed in gusts of husbandry. A woman would have hung over the cradle yearningly, but Luke stood fixed, his eyes feeding upon the child and greatly desiring what they might not see again. Sally Horner watched him with the glance of one who still holds judgment in abeyance. She had her way. She could afford to live and let live, and, being on her feet, nothing seemed to her so common or unclean as when she read the denunciatory psalms and talked to God about her enemies. A swift impulse, index of her new generosity, urged her to ask him to breakfast; but at that instant, he bent over, and touched the child's hair with his finger. Then, without one look behind, he was gone out of the room as softly as he had entered.

But Luke did not know in the least where he was going, save that he had promised to meet the Elder on the Cumnor Road and walk with him into the world. Joy, the phantom, was forever gone, but he felt the lightness of those who have cast their burdens overboard. Now he was alone. When the vision of Nancy rose up before him, he battled it with strenuous

hands. The child? that dream, too, was over. Yet, like a child himself, he kept on saying the rough formula he had made out of the Elder's preaching.

"You made me," he said in his heart to God. "You've got to see me through. I'll do what I can, but it's your business."

He thought he had thrown off human ties, never guessing how he had shifted them and welded another link by the way. The old man who had saved him was his neighbor, his friend, the only sign he had of God's great fatherhood. Yet he only felt that the Elder "needed a guardeen," and that some one with time on his hands ought to be by to keep him out of quagmires. So he turned into the crossroad and walked slowly through to the corner where they were to meet. He was far too early, but that had been his own choice, that he might creep into the Horner house before the world was stirring. At the corner, he climbed the fence, put his bundle under his head, and lay down to wait and muse; and there great comfort came to him.

Late in the forenoon, the Elder and Julia were walking the Cumnor Road, bound for their next abiding-place. "I'm afraid Luke'll think we're pretty late," said he, a double question

in his look and tone. He was always seeking her now with that pathetic gaze which seemed to ask her whether it was still so blind.

"You just as soon Luke should go?" he continued wistfully. "It won't be any put-out?"

"Not a mite," she answered, with more than her old-time cheerfulness. "He'll be some help, and I'd as soon mend for three as two. Besides" — But she did not finish.

Her thought had been, "If I should slip away some time into that place you are so wise — and so ignorant — about, why then he might be company for you." But she only smiled her new smile of secret knowledge, and walked her way contentedly.

Here the Cumnor Road is lined with elms, locked overhead in perfect arches. Under their canopy a horse and chaise came plodding on, the fair, quaint picture of an older day. Dolly, the horse, trod decorously, and Miss Hill sat upright behind her. Julia and the Elder, in their weedy footpath, walked straight on, without a glance, until Miss Hill drew up, an operation of some moment, and relaxed her pose to beckon. "Miss Kent," she called, with a ceremony King's End had never used, "I should be pleased to give you a lift. I'd ask your brother, but I should like to see you alone.

We'll go slow. He can overtake us. Dolly is not so smart as some."

Julia shook her head. "I'm much obliged," she said, in a voice enriched by certain sweet and tremulous notes of late. "I'm much obliged, but I like to walk. We've set out for good now."

"I should deem it a favor — though not to put you out. But we can speak right here, and I should be obliged if what we say need go no further."

The Elder walked on a few paces, and sat down on a ledge, where he waited, musing.

"I caught sight of you going by," continued Miss Hill, "and I thought first I'd have them call you in. But Dolly was all harnessed, and I concluded that was best. I brought this with me." She drew a folded paper from her reticule, and looked upon it seriously. "We have been going over my brother's papers, and I found this. Nobody knows about it but me. He did n't leave a will, but he made some notes for one. This is the paper where he mentioned you."

Julia put down her little parcel, because it seemed too heavy. She nodded again, having no breath for speech.

"He meant," continued the old gentlewoman

with dignity, "to leave you a sum of money and the right of a home on the place. I desire to say that, although the will was never made, I shall carry out my brother's wishes as I think he meant."

Julia reached forth her shaking hand. "Should you just as soon give me that paper?" she panted, her old face alive. "Is it his own writing? Should you just as soon?"

Miss Hill sat looking at her from behind a veil of fine, mild dignity. She was not altogether pleased by fevers of impatience in so old a woman. From her corner among the delicate usages of life, Julia seemed to her uncannily ancient, — one in whom worldly desires should have died long years ago.

"You understand it does n't give you any hold," she said. "It is n't law. If I carry it out, it will be by my own free will."

"Oh, I know that," said Julia radiantly. "I don't want the money — you're real good, Miss Hill! — nor a home. That's all past and gone. But the paper — you just give me that, and I'll be contented."

The other woman passed it to her wonderingly. "I never knew he was much interested in religion, but I presume your life and your brother's made a great impression on him," she

went on. "And being as your brother has n't practical ways" — There she stopped, aware of being unheard. Julia was regarding the careless memorandum with an absorbed and tender look, like one suddenly possessed of treasure and not yet able to compute its magnitude. Then she looked up, smiling, and the smile turned her from a dry old woman into a spirit which has incommunicable secrets of heaven and earth.

"I'll keep this," she said. "Yes, Miss Hill, I've got to keep it. You never'll be called on to pay anything; but you've given me now all you could, and more. Good-by, Miss Hill. You're real kind." She walked away, looking back and waving her hand fantastically.

Miss Hill sat there in the chaise and watched her, wondering. She was not an imaginative woman, and Julia Kent seemed to her even more unlike other folk than she had thought her: yet not more so, perhaps, than any one who lives a gypsy life, devoid of distaff knowledge. So, meditating decorously upon differences, Heaven-ordained, she turned old Dolly about, and drove back to oversee the cleaning of the Judge's room.

The Elder rose, as Julia neared him; she was

walking fast, perhaps afraid of being recalled for further speech. Her face shone upon him so that he could only repeat, "Why, Julia!" and again, "Why, Julia!"

She had slipped her love letter into her pocket. "That's a real good woman," she said, "real good! But I can't ride, can I? I don't want anything, do I, but living just as we've always lived?" She laughed excitedly, and yet happily, too.

The beat of hoofs echoed upon the road: Black Fancy at her best. She had wakened Luke, drowsing behind the wall, and flashed into the distance before he knew who summoned. Martin was driving, and by him sat his Nancy, all life and eagerness. When she saw the brother and sister, she bent forward, smiling at them. There was a history in her look: deprecation of their blame at being forsaken, sorrow over their starving life, and, above all, a buoyant justification of her choice. "Here he is!" said her triumphant air. "Here are we both together. That is all."

In the instant of their whirling by, Julia laid a hand upon her brother's arm. "Oh, John!" she cried, laughing in little gusts, though the tears lay on her withered cheek, "look at them!

look ! look ! They 're young and strong — and it 's summer time ! ”

But after all, she knew Nancy was no richer than she : only it was a different season of the year.

The Riverside Press

*Electrotyped and printed by H. O. Houghton & Co.
Cambridge, Mass., U. S. A.*

Boston Public Library
Central Library, Copley Square

Division of
Reference and Research Services

The Date Due Card in the pocket indicates the date on or before which this book should be returned to the Library.

Please do not remove cards from this pocket.

Boston Public Library



3 9999 05408 6176

